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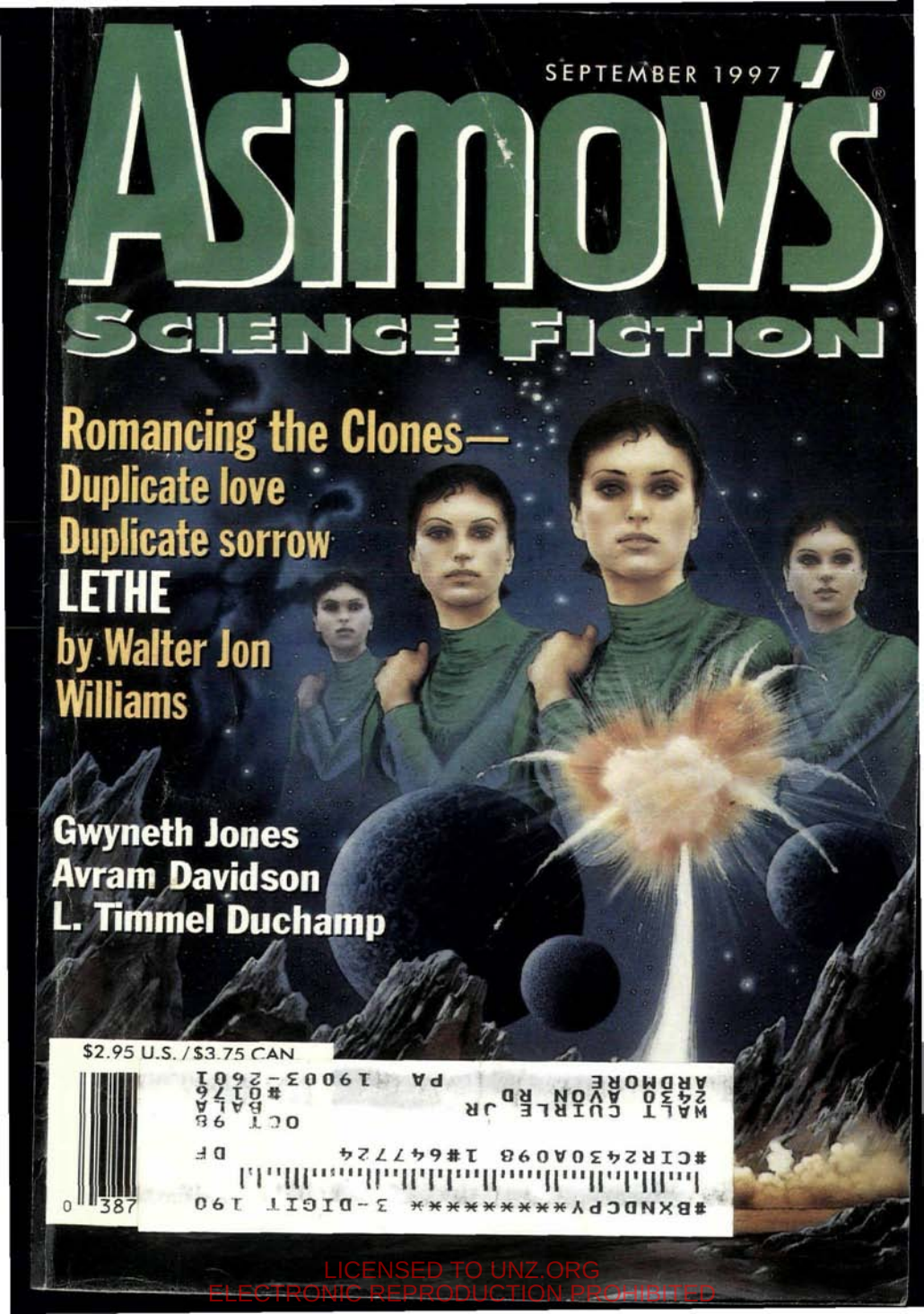

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SHIPS THAT SAIL TO MARS (Part One)

One of last year's most exciting scientific developments was the announcement, in the August 16, 1996 issue of *Science*, that a meteorite found in the Allan Hills of Antarctica contained apparent evidence of the one-time existence of organic life on Mars.

The meteorite—about the size of a potato, and weighing some 4.2 pounds—was discovered in 1984, lying atop a bleak expanse of wind-scoured blue ice. It had fallen from space about thirteen thousand years ago and, after millennia buried deep in an Antarctic ice field, had eventually been pushed upward by the powerful flowing movements of sub-surface ice streams until it was exposed to view by the erosive action of the wind. Meteorites are not uncommonly found in this part of Antarctica. But Allan Hills 84001, as this one is known, came in for special analytic attention after NASA scientists reported, several years ago, that its place of origin had been Mars. From that initial conclusion, the first of a number of startling deductive leaps involving this unimpressive-looking little lump of rock, came the rest of the hypotheses that led to last summer's revelation that we now had proof that life had once existed on the red planet.

The evidence for 84001's Martian origin stems from chemical analysis of the Martian soil performed by the two unmanned Viking Mars landers in 1976. Each Viking's arm scooped up a few spoonsful of Martian soil and placed them in a test chamber; the resulting tests showed an abundance of iron oxide, with lesser amounts of the oxides of aluminum, magnesium, calcium, sulfur, and titanium, and no carbon-based compounds at all, which might have provided some evidence of biological activity. Examination of pockets of trapped gas in the Allan Hills meteorite proved it to be chemically similar to the Martian soil samples, making it one of twelve such rocks in our possession that are believed to have come from Mars. It is the oldest of the twelve, in fact, with an estimated age of 4.5 billion years, meaning that it had crystallized from molten magma not long after Mars was formed.

From that starting point, NASA put together a breathtaking string of postulates, all of them plausible, none of them certain. The first was that a huge asteroid or comet had collided with Mars about 15 million years ago, pulverizing a great chunk of the red planet and sending a shower of Martian rocks into

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Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

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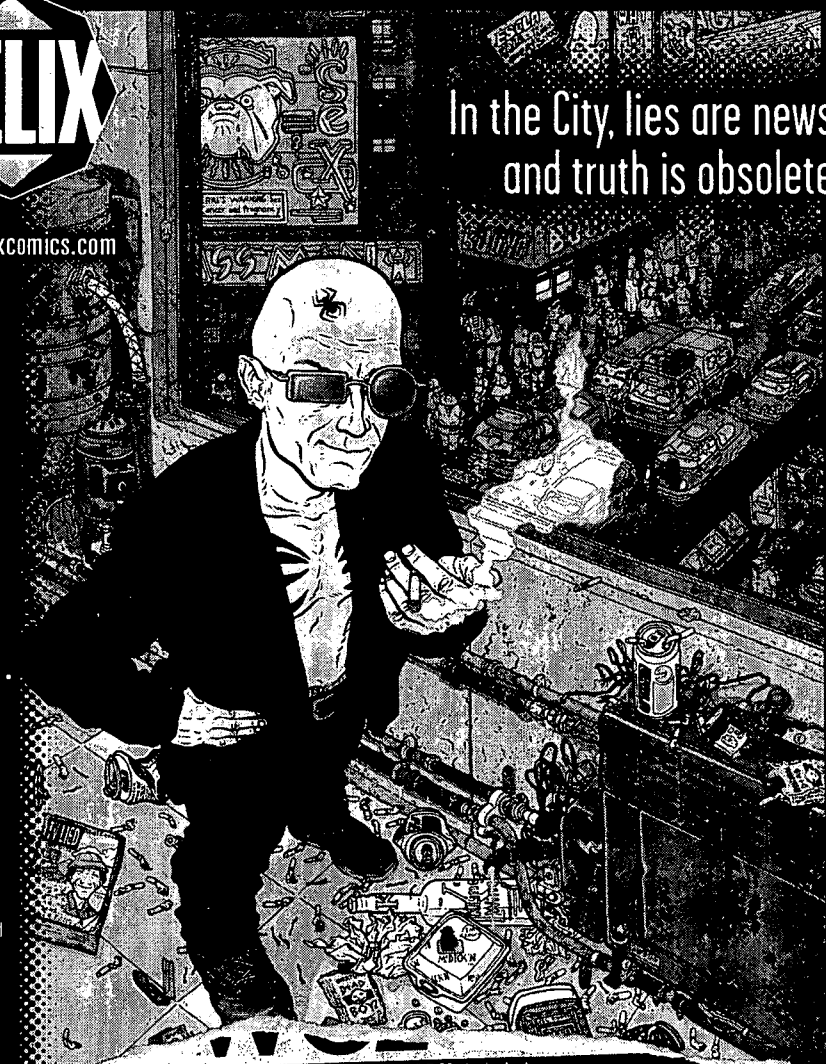

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space. These went in all directions—into the sun, or into orbit around it, or out of the solar system entirely. One of these rocks was Allan Hills 84001, which after wandering through space for millions of years fell into the gravitational field of Earth and crashed into Antarctica—about thirteen thousand years ago, the researchers calculate. There it was swiftly covered by Antarctic ice and remained sealed away, protected from contamination by terrestrial environmental forces, until it reached the surface again and was collected by a geological expedition.

The 1976 Viking studies had shown that Mars, which is, of course, virtually devoid of water today and seems to be an utterly dead planet, had had ample surface moisture billions of years ago. That brought up the possibility that simple life-forms might once have existed there. Here was Allan Hills 84001, a sample of rock from that ancient epoch. At the Johnson Space Center in Houston, a group of geochemists under the direction of Dr. David McKay began in 1994 to scrutinize the meteorite for traces of organic life.

They cut thin slices from the rock and examined them with an electron microscope and a laser-powered mass spectrometer. And they found, within the meteorite, unmistakable traces of the organic compounds known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs—molecules that are also found in ancient rocks on Earth, the residue

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left by the decaying bodies of bacteria and marine plankton. The researchers also discovered, in fissures within the rock, globules of carbonates that contained distinct black and white circles composed of iron sulfide and the mineral magnetite, much like particles known to signify the fossil remains of bacteria in terrestrial rocks.

The PAH and carbonate deposits were found to be somewhat younger than the parent rock, with an age of about 3.6 billion years. Which leads to the plausible conclusion that the organic molecules had been swept into fissures in Allan Hills 84001 at a time when Mars had been covered by water, and that primitive life-forms dwelling in that water had left fossil traces behind, to be found billions of years later by the Johnson Space Center scientists.

A bold conjecture, and an exciting one: our first evidence of the existence of life on any extraterrestrial world! But how likely is it that the NASA scientists' conclusions are the correct ones?

There is plenty of reason to think that they are not. As Dr. Paul H. Benoit, a specialist in cosmological chemistry from the University of Arkansas, noted, the claim that ancient life on Mars has been discovered is a "very speculative" one. PAH compounds, Dr. Benoit pointed out, have also been found in meteorites that we know did not come from other planets and which were formed before life could have come into existence in the solar system. And Dr. Stanley L. Miller of the University of California at San Diego, a pioneer in the study of how life might have come into being on Earth, remarked that "I don't know that the evidence supporting the claims in this Martian meteorite paper is all that strong. You find a lot of these hydrocarbon compounds in diesel exhaust and all kinds of combustion products." And other scientists pointed out that the possibility of contamination of Allan Hills 84001 by molecules of terrestrial origin cannot completely be ruled out, even though the NASA group has stated that the location of the hydrocarbon traces, deep within the meteorite rather than on its surface, do indeed refute that argument.

In general, though, NASA has taken a cautious view of its own findings. Dr. McKay of the Johnson Space Center himself regards the claim that the magnetite and iron sulfide traces within the carbonate globules point to the existence of ancient life on Mars as "the most controversial part of our conclusions." Though NASA favors the explanation that these are in fact microfossils from Mars, that is, at the moment, "simply an interpretation."

An exciting interpretation, yes. But a valid one? We should bear in mind Carl Sagan's axiom that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

How good is the evidence in this case? All the chemical tests and electron-microscope scans in the world are worthless if the entire

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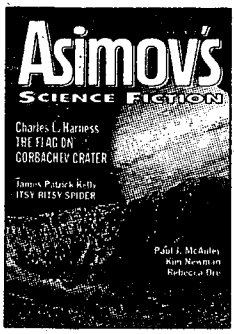

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chain of speculation is attached to thin air at one end.

One very basic question, for example, is crucial to the whole set of conjectures. Did Allan Hills 84001 in fact come from Mars? If it didn't, after all, then all the conclusions about PAHs and magnetite traces are meaningless.

There are very good scientific reasons, of course, to think that the meteorite from Antarctica was indeed once part of Mars, that it is of the age that the scientists think it is, that it found its way to Earth in the manner proposed, and that the organic molecules it contains got there at a time when Mars was much less cold and arid and inhospitable to life than it is now. But one disturbing point still remains unanswered and, at the moment, unanswerable. We think that Allan Hills 84001 came from Mars. We have very good circumstantial evidence in favor of that belief. Circumstantial evidence, though, is not the same as proof. The Martian identification of the meteorite is based entirely on comparison of it with the chemical makeup of a few tablespoons' worth of Martian soil analyzed by robot testing devices during the course of a 1976 unmanned mission.

As Dr. Thomas J. Ahrens, a planetary scientist at the California Institute of Technology, puts it, "The conclusions of the NASA group are hypothetical, because we don't yet have a known sample from Mars, only meteorite samples that we believe came from Mars." Dr. Ahrens finds the Allan Hills 84001 analy-

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sis "extremely interesting and important," but is troubled by this one great gap in the argument. "In the case of the Moon," he says, "we can compare meteorites collected on Earth with Moon rocks brought back by Apollo missions, and because of that, we now know without doubt that certain meteorites came from the Moon. But the interpretation of this Allan Hills meteorite, in a way, is a house of cards that could collapse if any of the inferences are wrong."

We science fictionists, naturally, have a vested interest in knowing that the Allan Hills 84001 inferences are correct. If we are utterly alone in the universe, if life turns out to be a phenomenon unique to our own small planet, then much of what we have been writing and reading about all these years must be relegated to the category of fantasy, to be regarded as on the same level of reality as tales of fairies and elves and dragons and warlocks and necromancers. Reading about fairies and elves and warlocks can be a great deal of fun, but very few of us believe that such things actually exist outside the pages of fantasy novels. When we speculate about galactic federations or visits from intelligent extraterrestrial life-forms, though, we like to think that we are dealing with something still in the realm of possibility. The discovery of a few fossil microbes on Mars gives us hope that those possibilities may yet be realized. I would not like to see that hope denied.

What to do? How much credence can we give the Allan Hills 84001 findings?

Dr. Ahrens of Cal Tech offers the obvious answer: We need, he says, to send a mission to Mars to bring back rock samples with which our Antarctic meteorite can be compared.

There's no other way to be sure about any of this. We don't even know for certain that Mars is without life today—only that there was no sign of it in the vicinity of the two Viking landers.

But what, if anything, are we doing to check any of these matters out?

More on this subject next month. With a little surprise twist for the fantasy fans. ●

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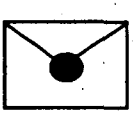

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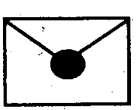

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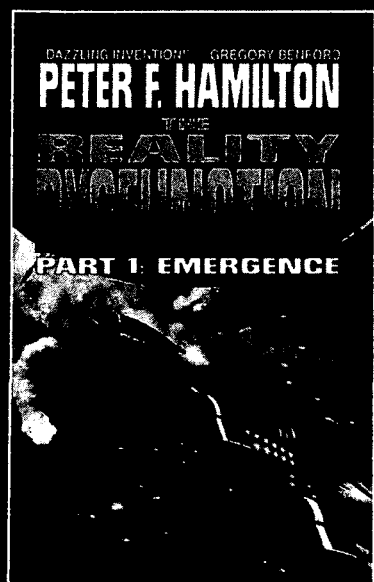

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Gardner Dozois

ELEVENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Pictured from left to right: Sheila Williams, Robert Reed, Fran Danon, Gardner Dozois, and Mary Rosenblum

Well, it's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction*'s Annual Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (gasp! Can it really have been that long?) eleventh year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1996. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. GAS FISH, MARY ROSENBLUM

2. Time Travelers Never Die, Jack McDevitt
3. Blood of the Dragon, George R.R. Martin
4. Chrysalis, Robert Reed
5. The Robot's Twilight Companion, Tony Daniel
6. The City of God, Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick
7. Human History, Lucius Shepard
8. Swimmers Beneath the Skin, Ian R. MacLeod
9. The Road to Reality, Phillip C. Jennings

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NOVELETTE

1. THE FLOWERS OF AULIT PRISON, NANCY KRESS

2. Age of Aquarius, William Barton
3. A Dry, Quiet War, Tony Daniel
4. Beauty and the Opéra or The Phantom Beast, Suzy McKee Charnas
5. The Land of Nod, Mike Resnick
6. Mountain Ways, Ursula K. Le Guin
7. The Edge of the Universe, Terry Bisson
8. Pyros, George E. Ewing (tie)
8. Cloud Cuckoo, Charles Sheffield (tie)
9. The Peacock Throne, Charles Sheffield
10. The Miracle of Ivar Avenue, John Kessel

SHORT STORY

1. DECENCY, ROBERT REED

2. On Sequoia Time, Daniel Keys Moran
3. The Soul Selects Her Own Society . . ., Connie Willis
4. The Joys of the Sidereal Long Distance Runner, Tony Daniel
5. The Last Sunset, Geoffrey A. Landis
6. Gifts, S.N. Dyer
7. Cider, Tom Purdom
8. In Coppelius's Toyshop, Connie Willis
9. Mortal Clay, S.N. Dyer (tie)
9. Community, Gardner Dozois (tie)
10. Breakaway, Backdown, James Patrick Kelly

POEM

1. CURSE OF THE SF WRITER'S WIFE, BRUCE BOSTON

2. The Year of the Dragon, Karawynn Long (tie)
2. Star-Rigger, David Lunde (tie)
2. This Neat Sheet, James Tiptree, Jr. (tie)
3. Pendragon, William John Watkins (tie)
3. This Is Just to Say, Mary A. Turzillo (tie)
4. The Robot's Wasteland, William John Watkins (tie)
4. time, Danny Daniels (tie)
4. Dinosuars May Be Ancestors of More Than Birds, Mary A. Turzillo (tie)

(Continued on page 53)

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L. Timmel Duchamp

L. Timmel Duchamp, whose last tale was the powerful and hard-hitting near-future SF story "Quinn's Deal" (*Asimov's*, April 1997), now takes us to seventeenth-century Italy for an enthralling look at . . .

The Apprenticeship of Isabetta di Pietro Cavazzi

But yes, it is true, that I, Isabetta Cavazzi, daughter of Pietro, have this twenty-third day of March, in the year of our Lord 1626, been received here in the Via Galliera, into the Casa del Soccorso di San Paolo, which some call the "Malmaritate," though most here have been dishonored rather by their lack of husbands than by the unhappiness of their unions.

(*Io, Isabetta di Pietro Cavazzi . . .*)

Never did I imagine that I would find myself in such a place. It is like a convent, only none of us are nuns. (Though they say that sometimes women who come here do indeed become nuns.) Through Mona Gentile's

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benevolence, I enjoy the privilege of a private room, for which she has agreed to pay an extra sixteen lire a month. The poorest here, with the least connections, toil day and night performing the most arduous and dirtiest of chores, and sleep in a common dormitory. I must, Mona Gentile told me, be very quiet and mannerly and docile. In that way I will help achieve the end toward which we together strive.

In fact, most of the women here are prostitutes, who have fallen on hard times, unable even to pay the Ufficio delle Bollette the fee for being licensed.

I write these words in secret, in accordance with the counsel given me by Mona Gentile last night when she gave me this little notebook. If it becomes too difficult to keep all that is in my mind and heart from passing my lips, it is better that I write it down, because concealing words written on paper is easier than stopping up the flow of a confidence once made. "Trust no one to keep unspoken anything that you tell them. You know how easily gossip flows from one to the next. And above all, neither confide nor confess anything about our affairs to any priest there you might see, since most priests lack the wisdom and sympathy of our own Don Tomaso."

(*E sopra tutto . . .*)

Here in this place where I am subject to the rigors of the Congregation's rule and sharing a roof with those who have fallen so low, Ser Achille's laugh rings again and again in my ears. "You fool," he said to me after he struck me so hard that I fell to my knees, his voice so cruel and scornful, "Signor Alberto has given you the trick. How could you believe that such a one as you could be worthy of marrying a signore of such a magnificent family? And you," he said to Mona Gentile, shaking his finger at her as Lucia often does with Giuseppe, when he has been naughty, "how could you encourage her to imagine herself so grand? She has squandered her honor, for illusions and vanity, like the poor country fool that she is. But you, my wife, knew better."

Ser Achille is wrong. My honor will be regained, and my love, too, with Mona Gentile's skillful help, God willing. Ser Achille knows nothing of the binding powers of love, or of the hammers that strengthen it where it falters (as I fear has happened with Berto). But Ser Achille knows little of his wife. And if he did know, who then would be the poor country fool, eh?

Rising for chapel well before dawn is no easier than rising in the cold dark to fetch in wood and water and get the fires going. Truly, it sounded to me so easy—to lead the devout life, with my only chores a bit of spinning and needlework. But when the matron woke me from my sleep in the cold, still darkness of a night not yet finished, I could think only of the emptiness of my stomach. It growled so loudly that I could hear it even through the ugly racket of our voices singing the liturgy (without so

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much as an organ to help guide our pitch). Oh the chapel is a dismal one, with just the crucifix above the altar and only the one painting, of the Magdalene washing Christ's feet, which cannot be seen at all before dawn, and only poorly when the light seeps in through the one window, which is behind the altar. Kneeling, it seemed to me the cold had settled into my bones for good. I could not stop shivering. Perhaps it is best, working straightaway on rising, for then even in the bitterest cold the blood heats quickly. And breakfast seems that much nearer when you are the one preparing it yourself, and when you can filch a crust of bread between trips to the well.

When Mona Gentile comes, I will tell her I need more food than they allow us. Perhaps they will give us meat when Lent is over, but though we observed Lent as Christians in Mona Gentile's house, I never felt hungry on leaving the table, as I do here. I had to bite my tongue this morning, for I wanted to insist to the matron that I should be given more because of the child. (Francesca—who we are supposed to address as "Mona Francesca," a travesty since she has never been married—is only an old prostitute, who has been on "good behavior" for the nine months she's been here. I have already learned that she and the other two warders have their favorites. But, "Make no fuss," Mona Gentile told me.) Perhaps Mona Gentile will bring me extra food, or bribe the matron.

Many priests think fasting and hunger is good for the soul. Yet this morning in chapel I could not keep my mind on the devotions, but only thought of how much I'd like to be building the fire in Mona Gentile's kitchen, and how good it would feel to be putting a cup of broth into my stomach. Somehow this kind of hunger is different from the hunger of a fast undertaken to do the powerful things Mona Gentile has been teaching me. It is, perhaps, because then I can feel the power inside myself, being drawn upon, and fashioned, whereas going before breakfast to sing lauds seems a gesture wasted. There is holy water, and a holy candle or two, but the bareness of the chapel makes it feel as though God would never deign to set foot in the place.

Perhaps it will be different when a priest is present, saying the Mass. . . .

When I took out this little book just now and looked at the pages I had already written, the ugliness of my scrawl made me think of how Ser Achille would mock it if he were to see it. In truth, I don't believe anyone but me could even read it. (Even I have trouble making out all of the words, because I have written them so closely together, with each word pressing on the last, with each line right up against the one above it.) Yet, that I can write, and read, too—and not just my name, as is the case with those of my brothers who did learn to make their names—this gives me an advantage, because it means that not only can I write down my thoughts instead of foolishly speaking them to get them out of my head,

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but I can make power-writing, which is in many things better than making a hammer. . . .

There are birds nesting in the roof of this house. I hear them now, flapping and billing and cooing. Doves, perhaps. Which make me think of my love, my own dear Berto, and the little bird of his that I have pleased so much. . . .

(*Le columbe, forse.*)

Oh, yesterday was wonderful! Mona Gentile came to see me—accompanied by her sister-in-law, the Signora Consolini, whose husband is a member of the Congregation, and so is held in the highest esteem in this house. Last night before sleeping—lying in sheets warm from the bricks I heated in the kitchen hearth, as the Signora Consolini insisted on my behalf—I went over and over in my mind all that had passed between us, enjoying the repetition with almost as much exaltation as I felt during her visit. She walked with her sister through the entire house before drawing me aside, asking that I show her my room. And though I had vowed to myself never to complain to her of my place here, the first thing I said when we were alone was how, if it was on account of my pregnancy that I was here, I wish I had chosen rather to abort it than to tell Berto of it and demand he restore my honor.

"Foolish child!" she said. And she remonstrated with me, and said that in the eyes of all my value had risen with my pregnancy, and that if I safely delivered a healthy child it would be proof of my fertility, and that the fact that I was pregnant made the suitor Ser Achille had selected for me more eager than before to wed me, once I have had my honor repaired by staying here and living piously and chastely under the Congregation's supervision. This she said here, in this room, which is where she gave me a store of sugared almonds. (She and the Signora Consolini brought also a barrel of salted fish, which I and the others who are pregnant are to be given every morning in addition to gruel.)

And then, it being mild and midday, we went out into the courtyard, and walked to and fro in the sun, our arms linked as if we were indeed mother and daughter. (And truly Mona Gentile always set herself to teach me the things mothers teach their daughters, since I left my own mother at such a tender age. And besides, that time Ser Achille exploded in wrath when it seemed to him that Berto had given me the trick, he said that this stained his own honor, because my having served in his house from the time I was eleven years put him in the place of a father to me, for that he had made a contract with my father that he would provide me with a dowry and an honorable marriage.)

"Tell me," Mona Gentile said as we walked, "do you remember the first time we talked about the special powers of the body?" And of course I remembered, so clearly, the beginning of my secret apprenticeship with

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her, when she began by asking me if I knew any spells, and if I had ever employed them. At which I told her of how when I was seven, and the caterpillars infested the cabbages, my mother had put the yoke on her shoulders, and had me ride on it, as she walked through the fields, calling out to the caterpillars a spell she said she had called out for her mother, as her mother had before her. And that the spell was in words brought from the land her great-grandmother had lived in, *Fui, fui ruie et il mio con ti mangiuie,* which means "Flee, flee, furry caterpillars, or my cunt will eat you." The words were strange to my ears, and felt strange in my mouth, but I have never forgotten them. And after I told Mona Gentile of this spell that I knew and had made, riding on the yoke, she asked me if I understood that the power of the spell came from my being a woman—or going to be a woman. And she asked me if my mother had said why a young girl, and not herself, must make the spell. And I remembered, then, my mother saying the spell did not work if it wasn't made by a girl before she had begun issuing her flowers.

So I remembered all this yesterday when Mona Gentile asked, and when I said yes, I did remember, she then stopped and laid her hand over my womb, which isn't very big yet, and said that all the power that is mine as a woman is working now to make a human being, and she touched my breasts and said that the power was working in my breasts now, too. (I felt foolish at Mona Gentile's mention of my breasts. It was when I went to her, saying that I thought I needed the spell for *madrazza,* that she discovered I was pregnant, which I hadn't known. "And how," she said then, "would a woman who has never given birth, come to suffer *madrazza,* which is caused by an excess of milk?") "And so it is true," I asked her, "what they say about breast milk, that it is flowers stored up and cooked in the breasts?" And she said yes, which was why husbands who could afford to pay a wet-nurse would not allow their wives to suckle. (Besides, of course, their not wishing to abstain from the pleasures of the marital bed for all that time.)

In the countryside we are poor, and all women suckle. But then the rich women in the city always do send their babies away from the moment of their birth, or bring women in from the country to do that work.

My hand is too cramped to write more. And the light is getting thinner. And we will soon be called to supper, and then compline, anyway.

I woke early this morning, well before they summoned us to lauds, in the cold, still darkness. Though I had great need to relieve myself, I lingered in bed, where some of my body's warmth, at least, remained. And yet the cold did not seem that terrible to me, because I felt a great warmth kindled in my heart, as I remembered Mona Gentile's visit, still fresh in my thoughts. "And why," Mona Gentile had said to me when I told her how I loathed rising for lauds, "do you think nuns and monks are

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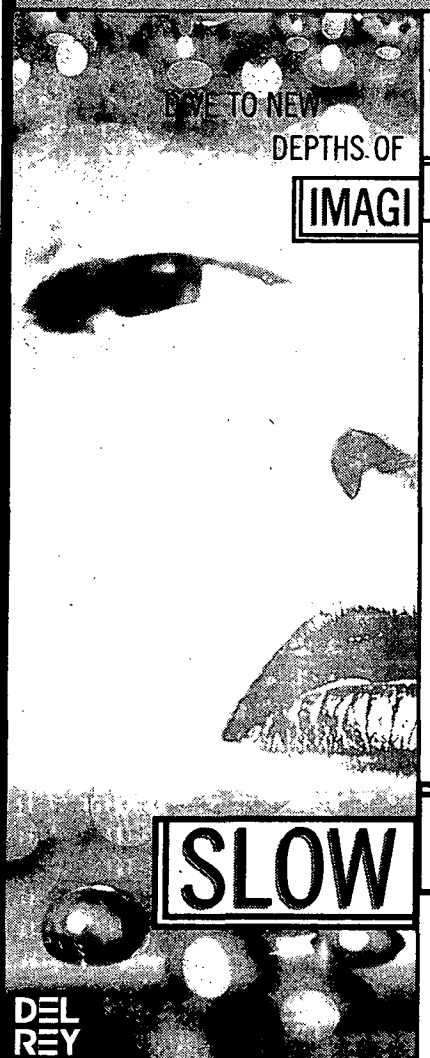

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obliged to do this? While it is true that all the Signori wish masses to be said for the souls of all their dead fathers and brothers and grandfathers, you may believe me that they all rest easier knowing that thousands of nuns and monks rise in the night to say matins and lauds, during the hours in which all the powers of heaven and earth are nearly extinguished, particularly in the two hours before dawn, when the earth has lost its heat, and finally even the birds become alarmed and cry frantically and pathetically their most doleful plaints, a time when even demons and spirits and angels flee the utter coldness and stillness of a dying world. And then the nuns and monks rise for lauds, seeking to touch the heart of God, lest he not let heat and life and vitality return to the earth, and lo, as the end of lauds comes, the sun rises, and life has been saved, again, from the risk of endless night. And then there is power enough to say Mass, and all living things whether incarnate or only spiritual revive, in the daily resurrection of what we call the 'new day.' "

Mona Gentile is so wise, understands so much! And yet is so beautiful, her eyes the most radiant blue, her hair a fiery gold that compares with the sun itself. . . . It almost seems a scandal for a miserable prostitute like that little Anna Laura Spighi to whisper in my ear, "Your lady is so very beautiful," and yet it is true, and it makes the others here look at me differently, to see that such a beautiful and respectable lady as Mona Gentile takes so great an interest in me.

(*È tanta bellissima, tua donna . . .*)

Of course I do not tell anyone here how Mona Gentile came to bestow her trust and affection on me. After all, when I first came to Ser Achille's house, I was just another miserable girl from the country hired to do the drudgery that must be done in every household, even those in the city. And I was laughably ignorant, and required much scolding before I learned how to give good service. Mona Gentile had scant patience with me, and seemed beyond pleasing. And my weeping with homesickness increased her displeasure. But one day she caught sight of the caule mother had placed around my neck. ("Never, never, never part yourself from it," my mother told me. "It is what makes you special, it holds all the power of my womb when it was making you.") I was frightened, for I thought, being a fine city lady, she might make me throw it in the fire (which is what, my mother says, some priests make people do when they discover them wearing their caules, because the priests know the caules hold power, and can't abide anyone else having power besides themselves). But in fact Mona Gentile spoke gently to me, and called me "sister," because she said she too had been born with a caule, and wore it next to her skin, though she never let anyone see it, especially not any man. And from then on she began to instruct me on the ways of magic, and the powers of the body and hearth. And I became then not just her servant, but her pupil, and her "sister of the caule."

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But I have yet to write down (as if I could forget anything that Mona Gentile has said to me!) the rest of our conversation. It concerned Berto, and my pregnancy, and Ser Achille's plans for my future. Mona Gentile says that Berto is very pleased that I am pregnant. (And yet he will not keep his word to me! Which I do not understand!) He is concerned, she said, that I look on only beautiful things, and that I eat well, so that the child will be born healthy. (To this end, he has pledged to make a donation to this house.) If it is a boy, he will give it to a wet-nurse he will hire, and when it is weaned raise it in his house. If it is a girl—I had to prompt Mona Gentile to tell me—he will have the child taken to the foundling home. Alas, poor thing! And how many survive to live after having been taken to that place! I have heard, I had no need to ask Mona Gentile about it, because it is so well known and talked of in the city, how foundling homes were first established to take the infants of slaves, because their milk was wanted by their masters for renting out, and would dry up if they were to watch their own children die before their eyes, or else would be given them illicitly, as a theft from their masters. While there are few if any slaves in the city now, yet there are still children born for whom there is no milk, their own mothers' milk being needed for other children..

It is bitter indeed. For whether I give birth to a boy or a girl, Ser Achille will arrange a contract for me to go as *balia* to a good family in the city, for wages which will enlarge my dowry greatly (particularly since some of the portion coming to me—as well as the sheets I had sewn and laid aside—will be spent on my maintenance here). And when the child I am contracted to nurse has been weaned, I will return here briefly, and then marry.

Wet-nursing is an honorable profession, Mona Gentile said to me. But I was so upset that Berto is eager for the child, yet still refuses to publicly acknowledge me as his wife, that I said again that I wished I had taken the sage-leaf medicine, for then I would still be Berto's wife, and that besides, I would probably die in childbed. But Mona Gentile promised me she would deliver me herself, and asked me did I not have faith in her powers? And of course it is true, if Mona Gentile is with me, I must be delivered safely. As for Berto, she did not need to remind me that Ser Achille owes much to Berto's father, who is the magistrate for whom Ser Achille has been a notary for many years. These city ways! I always believed in my heart that if Berto broke his word to me, that he would be made to keep it, as when I was eight years I witnessed my uncles, the priest and the mayor besides make another who would break his word to his pledged wife, marry her as he had promised.

But, "Do not despair," Mona Gentile said to me. "Pretend to agree to any arrangements Ser Achille makes for you. There is time, and opportunity, for making Signor Alberto change his mind. Do not forget the power

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of the hammer, my child. I promise you, Signor Alberto will be struck. We will make him come back to you, begging you to marry him. Trust me."

(*Mi credi.*)

I do, Mona Gentile, I do trust you. But how to make a hammer in a place like this? Teach me, my lady, teach me how. And if it hurts Berto—though of course not mortally . . . if it causes him pain . . . let him think then how he has caused *me* pain.

Yesterday when Mona Gentile visited she brought me lemon verbena, mint, and camomile, for steeping in hot water and drinking with honey (which she also brought me), the lemon verbena in the morning, the mint in the afternoon, and camomile in the evening, before compline. Though I keep these herbs and the honey in my room, I still need to use the kitchen hearth, for getting the water. But that is part of the point! Not only are these drinks good for pregnant women, but I need access to the kitchen hearth if I am to make the hammer that will bring Berto back to me. As Mona Gentile observed yesterday, though she can prepare some of it, and place it for me, there are certain things that I must do myself. For all that my powers are diminished, because they are needed for the growing of the child, they are not entirely lost.

And so I made an appearance in the kitchen yesterday evening, not just to fetch the bricks that I heat there, but to steep the camomile leaves in hot water. Mona Elissa was there, of course. (She has a bed in the alcove to the side of the hearth, where it is nearly always warm, just as I do in Mona Gentile's house. That arrangement, plus the fact that it is she whom the Congregation entrusts with the key to the cellar, where all the food staples and wine are kept, makes her behave as if she is lady of the house. Of course it is true that she is a widow, and more respectable than any of us here, since it is only because her children are dead and her husband misused her dowry that she is here, which she prefers to a convent.) Mona Elissa stood with her hands on her hips, like a great black crow shrilling warnings at me, only instead of cawing, she held her lips pressed tightly together, as though to let me know that it was only because I am the Signora Consolini's protégée that she would allow me the use of her hearth.

"Accustom all who work in the kitchen to seeing you there often," Mona Gentile said. I know, without doubt, what enrages Mona Elissa. It is not that I am Signora Consolini's protégée, which is the reason the matron hates me, since she owes her position to the Signora's rival, Donna Masserenti, also the wife of a member of the Congregation. No, Mona Elissa dislikes anyone she cannot order about as a servant; and those who enter the kitchen are mostly the residents who are obliged to work for their maintenance. And so it vexes her that she lacks authority over me. She is foolish, though, for thinking herself above the factional rivalry. (Coming from a mere village, I know that it is always necessary to choose

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sides. Even in the great city of Bologna, it is necessary. And here in this small house, it is even more necessary. Mona Elissa has not been here above two years. That is not long enough to judge the situation.)

This is how foolish Mona Elissa is: "She is the Signora Consolini's little pet," that one hissed at the miserable little Catarina, who was scrubbing the enormous kettle that had been used to make the soup we ate at supper. And did she notice, that the little Catarina sent me a friendly, respectful look, as if to say that though she is a partisan of the matron, she might change sides if it were expedient?

Mona Elissa's voice is the loudest at lauds and compline, and the ugliest, too. It is a sort of nasal drone, that takes no pleasure in its own use. It's no wonder she snapped at me for humming while I waited for the little kettle Mona Gentile brought me to boil!

I woke this morning in tears, brimming with a grief I have carried with me all day. I dreamed a thing unbearable, I dreamed the one thing I haven't allowed myself to think might be really true, however carelessly my Berto may have behaved (and thus unthinkingly brought me to this place). I dreamed that Berto betrayed me as Ser Achille has tried to make me believe, that he deliberately gave me the trick, all the while laughing at me behind my back. In the dream it was the night of carnival in which I did that so daring thing—emboldened, perhaps, by the assurance Berto's love had brought me—that is, dressing in Rico's clothes (which because they were so large on me exposed no more than my legs, which many have seen anyway in the ordinary course of accidents life holds for girls like me). In the dream, as happened that night, Berto was amused and applauded my boldness—until Francesca appeared, and said loudly, for Berto, Rico and all of our friends who were making beautiful dances with us: "That one will end up at the baths, she looks like one of us already." And hearing that, from one who for several years worked at the baths (and according to the portress dressed often in male clothing, and even allowed herself to be used for every kind of sodomy, including the kind that is done by men to boys), the other girls there spoke disapprovingly to me (as they did that night of the carnival), and Rico and Berto sneered, and Berto said for all to hear: "Yes, she will do well at the baths, for I have given her the trick, as she must very well know!"

Mona Gentile says that dreams are not always what they seem at first sight. But the heaviness in my heart is so sorrowful that if I dared I would have spent the day in my room, weeping. Only the thought of Francesca coming in here, playing the matron over me, taunting me for my foolishness, made me go through the motions of all that is expected of me here.

"Fear is the first great enemy of love," Mona Gentile once said to me, when she explained to me why we must never let those we are binding to

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us with the magical arts know of our labors for them. "Fear," Mona Gentile said, "and coldness. Hot anger is always better for love than cold. Cold anger will kill love more surely than anything else. Cold anger makes contempt." Surely I must not let fear poison my love for Berto, for that love is greater than anything I can think of, greater than my life itself. I must think of his eyes, and his hands, and his mouth, which have been so tender with me, and are unto themselves grace incarnate. I must try to remember his delight on that night of carnival when I wore boy's clothing, I must try to remember the fierce joy of our dancing, and how everyone remarked about it how perfectly we are matched. That was the reality, the dream is false, a warning against despair—and against the evil machinations of the matron.

My fear is that locked up here, I will be forgotten by Berto. Men forget the things of the body so quickly—I have heard Mona Gentile remark on this again and again. But they are written on our bodies, so that we never forget any of it, neither the pain nor the pleasure, neither the sorrow nor the joy. Which is the reason, Mona Gentile says, that magical arts are needed to bind men.

As for the question of "giving me the trick," what matters is how Berto feels about me, not that I have given him my honor, and am now without any at all. "Honor is determined by men, who manage everything to do with its arrangements," Mona Gentile said when we first talked about this. "Women are powerless in such matters, except when defaming one of their own number, since men will believe the evil one woman speaks of another, but dismiss the good; and so questions of honor do not concern us. We have other ways of making arrangements, ways in which men are in turn powerless. Let Ser Achille and Signor Alberto worry about honor; we, my child, will arrange things in our own way, and when we have done, they will make their arrangements to suit ours."

As with love, the magical arts require confidence without arrogance, in order to work. And yet, I am in despair.

Blessed Madonna, help me!

How clever of me, is it not, that I've invented my own abbreviations, to make writing so much easier! Because my fingers grow cramped so quickly, I have been reluctant to bother with writing, especially now that I seem to want to sleep all the time. But because some of us now sit outside, in the courtyard, the weather being so pleasant, with our spindles and flax, and because of the great scandal the very details of which are yet held secret from us here, I find my tongue making too free with its desire for speaking the many things in my mind. And so, remembering how Ser Achille and other notaries use abbreviations when they write (because many times they are required to write down, at great speed, everything that is said, particularly in criminal cases, and also because many

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of the same expressions and phrases are used repeatedly in legal documents, and are less tedious to the hand when noted by a single mark or letter with a mark distinguishing it), it seemed to me a clever thing to invent my own set of marks. (And I note, too, that it is not a bad thing that only I know what they signify!)

The scandal—ah, that is an enigma. Three of us were out in the courtyard this afternoon, working our spindles diligently, and singing pretty little ditties with only the most innocent of words, since we are forbidden to sing "love songs." (We are also forbidden to "chatter and gossip," which is why we choose to sing, since it is obvious when our voices are lifted in song that we are obeying the rules of the Congregation.) Suddenly the little Catarina came rushing out to us, sputtering with so much excitement that at first she could not get the words out. "It is impossible!" she said. "But it is true! I cannot believe it, but the Signora Messina Vignola, whom we all know, because she is the wife of Signor Flaminio Segnelli, and has often come here with other ladies, has been brought here to *live!* I was in the hall, scrubbing the tiles, when Mona Antonia gave entry to her and several signori, one of them the dottore, her husband!"

All of us in the courtyard believed that Catarina had misunderstood. The Signora Vignola has been here several times since I arrived. Not only does she come often with other ladies, bringing provisions and inspecting and questioning us as is usual with many of the wives of Congregation members, but it is not long since she attended the service held in our chapel on Holy Saturday, and attended the Easter feast with her husband and other Congregation members and their wives, that was given for us here in this house. But Catarina was not mistaken! It seems that the Signor Segnelli has, with the approval of other Congregation members, chosen to confine his wife here, with us! I do not understand it. For a Signor to send his own wife, a fine lady, to such a place . . . it is, as I say, a great enigma. Francesca, however, tells us we are not to speak about it, that it is none of our affair.

The lady will, of course, keep to herself. We are to treat her with the great respect we always pay the wives of Congregation members. . . .

I have often heard Ser Achille, joking with Mona Gentile, call the Florentines "wise" for keeping their wives always locked up at home, with their only freedom that of peering out the smallest slits of windows, or occasionally standing on their loggias, to witness holy processions. (In that place, men as old as Ser Achille need not worry when they take wives as young as Mona Gentile!) But of course, as Mona Gentile says, everyone knows that all business and even political affairs would be thrown into confusion here in Bologna if the women were locked up. And besides, she says, a woman locked up is a prisoner, and as such an enemy to her keeper. "But Florentine women are silent as mutes," Ser Achille always retorts. "What bliss that must be, to escape the constant natterings of women!"

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Many are the women who have come to this place to flee abusive husbands. (It is for that that it came to be called the "Malmaritate.") If it hadn't been that Signor Segnelli accompanied Signora Vignola here, it would be easier to believe she had fled for safety, than that he was locking her up for punishment.

I have such fine news to tell Mona Gentile, that I am more eager than ever she visit me again soon. Today, for the first time, I saw the Devil's eyes behind the flames in the kitchen hearth. I have been following, with the greatest care and diligence, her instructions that I feed a little pinch of salt to the fire daily, when Mona Elissa's back is turned, so that the Devil will consider that hearth a good place to lurk. But to tell the truth, it frightens me a little to be coaxing the Devil here, on my own, without Mona Gentile's strength to guide and protect me. If I am to be successful in making the hammer that will re-bind Berto to me, I must, Mona Gentile says, have recourse not only to the powers of the saints and the holy things of the Church, but to a very little of the power of hell, as well. The hammer I will make will be like the one Mona Gentile made three years ago, to bind Signor Paolo Suffrageneo's passions the more closely to her lest her pregnancy cause him to recoil. Of course I will not be able to walk through the streets along the path they lead criminals to their execution, nor afterward walk with my hands tied behind my back through the house, with all the doors and windows open, speaking the Our Father for the meanest souls that have been executed, thirty-three times. But there are other things that will serve to make my hammer strong, and Mona Gentile tells me she has a piece of hangman's rope and some blood that dropped from the arm of a thief when his hand was being severed.

It is not dangerous, Mona Gentile says, to have limited contact with the Devil. We acknowledge him, so that he can be made to work for us whenever we wish. The little bit of salt we give him in the fire is as nothing, like the merest drop of water in the sea. It encourages him to think that if he helps us he might eventually snare us, as sometimes happens with the most foolish or unhappy of women. And to treat the Devil so is not a sin, for God could not possibly be offended by our making use of the Devil without giving him anything but trifles in return. Mona Gentile has discussed these things with Don Tomaso, who told her only to be careful when having any dealings with the Devil, and to do no harm to others, including not forcing them truly against their will.

I cannot believe my hammer could harm Berto. It might cause him pain, for as long as it takes him to remember me and his promises to me (which he surely did mean at the time he made them), but I do not believe it truly against his will, in that his will in the first place intended to do all the right things by me, and not hurt or betray me (which giving me the trick would indeed do). Are hammers necessarily implements of harm?

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Certainly not!
(*Certo che non!*)
It is a question of aligning the sympathetic forces of nature to the ends to which they are meant to go. Berto was drawn to me from the beginning, as was I, in the most natural way possible. I could feel the power of Fortune in the warmth of that first moment, even before his beautiful smile penetrated his face, when his eyes recognized me. My face, neck, and belly suffused with a fiery blush, and such was my condition that I almost forgot that I was to give him the wine I had poured out for him and Ser Achille.

I knew, yes I *knew* in that moment. And though our passion has always been fierce, let no one deny that we knew we were meant for one another, body and soul, from the start. It was this, and not mere lust, that made me tremble through the night, sleepless, my mind burning with the memory of eyes I knew, of eyes that knew me. . . .

Today, it being Sunday, we went to Mass in the chapel. A certain Don Alessandro, of whom it is said he is from Venice, preached a sermon about how the lust of women threatens the souls of both women and men, and continuously makes chaos and unleashes havoc on the good order of society. And because he talked about how women give themselves to the Devil because of their lust, I at first thought he knew that I had been throwing salt to the Devil in the kitchen hearth, and was warning me against doing any business with the Devil at all. But as it happened he spoke of witches only a little, and instead almost all of the rest of his sermon spoke about how women who do not strive to control their terrible lust willfully and scandalously destroy their own homes and the honor of their families. And everyone sitting in the chapel knew then that the priest meant his remarks to be taken to heart by the Signora Messina Vignola. And because the Signora has brought so much trouble and acrimony into this house, making demands on every woman living here, whom she treats as her servants, and complaining constantly, which makes an assault on my ears especially, her room being next to mine, many were the smiles only barely hidden from the priest and Congregation's scrutiny.

The Signor Dottore Flaminio Segnelli, the lady's husband, was not among the Congregation members present today at Mass. (But who would choose our chapel for attending Mass, if they had a free say?)

But of course, as became clear to me later, when I heard the matron joking with the portress, whores do not put much store by *female* lust, since it is the lust of *males* that benefits their pocketbooks, and *female* lust, as they believe, though attractive to men when it is simulated, often drives men who are not already lustful away.

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And this day Mona Gentile came here, to attend the Signora Messina! Since we had heard that the Congregation had ruled when it permitted the Signora Messina to stay here that it would be forbidden the wives of the members to hold any conversation with her whatsoever, this was surprising indeed! But the president of the Congregation made a special dispensation for the visit, because Mona Gentile is a healer of women's diseases. To my great joy and gratification, Mona Gentile requested that I assist her, and then she sent away the little Catarina, who has attached herself to the Signora as mud does to the feet, ankles and fingernails of any who work in the fields.

The Signora Messina suffers from the whites—which is a thick white discharge issuing from her womb, like a continual flow of white flowers. It stains her linen, which has constantly to be changed and washed. The smell, when her skirts are lifted, is strong, not only of the smell that habitually issues from that place, but of something like the stink of hops fermenting. Mona Gentile has made a pessary for her; and because it must be changed often, it means that Mona Gentile will be visiting often, too.

It is good fortune for me—though not for Signora Messina—that her husband has made her to be locked up here. It is an ill wind that blows no good, my father was always saying to my mother.

After Mona Gentile finished attending the Signora, we came into my room—bringing the basin with the water she had used to wash the Signora Messina's privates. The basin was the one Mona Gentile often uses for far-seeing, especially when its water has been penetrated with vital, potent fluids. Mona Gentile stood in the patch of sunlight streaming in through the unshuttered window, holding this basin. After she had me compose myself, she bade me sign myself with the cross, to draw God's power into me, and then instructed me to look at the surface of the water only. And there was a shine on the water, which I knew would hold the images I wanted to see, but at first I had trouble concentrating on it only, for I kept seeing traces of the ropy white curds that had been left in the water. But after a little while it was as though the dazzle of the sun had showered gold into my eyes, for the shining surface suddenly rose up, like a liquid, radiant cloud, in the image of Berto! "My love!" I cried out. And Berto's eyes turned to me, as though he could hear me calling him, then dimmed suddenly and unaccountably. My throat closed when Berto turned his head away, as though he could not bear to see me, and the image vanished, and though my eyes were still a little blinded, when I blinked several times I saw just the basin, half-full of water in which drifted nasty bits of debris.

Mona Gentile assured me that my power to hold the image will grow stronger each time I summon it. I remembered, then, to tell her that I had felt the baby moving in my womb. She expressed joy, and said that she would tell Berto, because she knew it would please him.

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When Mona Gentile came today to refresh the Signora Messina's pessary, she whispered to me that the lady's husband had been able to persuade the Congregation to keep her here only by promising them an enormous sum of money. She says that Signora Consolini says that very few members of the Congregation know the reason Signor Segnelli wishes her to be kept here, and that those who know are telling no one, not even their own wives. When I remarked on how much quieter the Signora has become since Mona Gentile began ministering to her, how she no longer screams and screeches the whole day long, how she has even begun to treat Catarina as her special pet, rather than her slave, Mona Gentile said that the whites often turn even the most pleasant of women into raving shrews, for they cause great burning and itching in the private places, and also deprive the sufferer of sleep. The remedy in the pessaries is working, and the whites are lessening more each day. And also, Mona Gentile has been providing the lady with sleeping draughts. Lack of sleep alone makes people irritable and easily vexed, even when they lack the Signora's other afflictions.

And then Mona Gentile took the opportunity to praise the Signora's persistence and resolve. "We don't know what her husband, the fine dottore, who is good only for casting horoscopes and spouting Latin, which do nothing for afflictions like the whites, wishes to accomplish by keeping her here. But by making war against her, he has miscalculated. Men say always, with the utmost confidence, that women lack *virtù*. But whatever drives that lady, she has more *virtù* and *forza* in her than the most relentless condottiere. She is recovering and consolidating her strength now, the Signora. Observe, my Isabetta, that she does not weep, nor pity herself. For that reason, she will prevail." As Mona Gentile spoke thus, her eyes shone, with that blue fire that makes me feel her words deep inside, where they kindle a blaze within me, that makes me more determined than ever to please her.

"The dottore has never attended a childbed," Mona Gentile said, scoffing. "Or he would know that the women who successfully bring children into the world require as great strength, determination, and fortitude, as any knight battling a thousand Turks."

And when Mona Gentile had gone, and I was down again in the courtyard spinning, I went over and over her words, and knew she meant me to take them deep into my heart. And though I had to get up often to visit the privy under the stairs, which is one of the afflictions of pregnancy, my heart sang a proud, fierce song. I, too, will prevail!

This morning the matron discovered me feeding the birds a little of the grain Mona Gentile brings me for that purpose. It was at that very moment, when the birds were descending to me with their great clatter and

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clack of wings, when I was throwing out the first handful from the knotted bit of cloth in which I keep it, that she screeched at me, "What are you doing, are you crazy?" And she confronted me, as though I were a great malefactor. It was bad enough, she said, that the birds lived in the eaves, and that we had to hear them night and day, cooing and crying and scrabbling about on the roof. It was bad enough that they bothered us from time to time in the courtyard, and made a nuisance of themselves in the kitchen garden. But that I encouraged them to it! That was a *sin*, and wasting grain that could be used for food, of which we never can get enough in this house!

In my startlement (and if truth be given, with intention), I dropped the cloth so that the grain spilled out all around me, and the birds feasted royally.

After several minutes of scolding, in which I pleaded that even the blessed holy Francis had fed the birds from his own begging bowl, the matron thought to demand of me where I had gotten the grain. Surely, she said, I must have stolen it from the pantry, and how had I done that, when Mona Elissa and the president of the Congregation are the only ones with keys to that place?

If she had asked me that question first, instead of scolding at such length, I would probably not have been quick enough to answer as I did. "Mona Francesca," I said respectfully, "I got the grain from here." And I showed her the paving stone lying loose and out of place, beneath which I usually keep my cache.

"And how did it get there?"

I did not answer, only shrugged.

She looked shrewdly at me, and then said that it would serve me right if she made me dig up all the paving stones, in case there was more grain put away there.

I am certain she will not search my room. And since she can't know why I feed the birds, she cannot threaten to have the Congregation throw me out for it. If the Signora Consolini had not been providing so generously for our table, I believe she would have cut my portions, in retaliation for the imagined theft. "Sometimes saints can be fools, and as wrong as any other sinner!" she said in the rage of the moment. Imagine, a fallen whore passing judgment on such an honored, holy saint!

Somehow, though that old biddy will be watching me with the greatest vigilance, I must find a way to keep feeding the birds. It is not enough that they live in the eaves. They must be trustful of me, and come to my hand when I tempt them. Just as I must keep feeding the fire with salt, to keep the Devil tamely by me, for when I need him. It is not enough, as Mona Gentile says, to wear the caule. One must make one's preparations, thoroughly, carefully, and with the best order possible.

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It being the first new moon since the Midsummer Day, Mona Gentile brought me the wax doll and other items needed to begin preparing the hammer. Most important of these are the hairs she acquired from Berto, and a shirt of his with his blood on it, and a few strands from a hangman's rope. She said that she arranged for Berto to have a nosebleed while visiting Ser Achille, one so heavy that he soiled his shirt, and could thus be persuaded to part with it. It would have been fine enough to get the shirt, but the blood on it will of course make the hammer that much more powerful. Also, Mona Gentile managed to get a doll with a male member, which is not always possible, since one cannot then claim to be buying the doll to make into an image of a saint, or even Christ.

Oh, such a beautiful shirt, of such fine cotton! I savored the pleasure of burying my head in the cloth still redolent of Berto's scent, which conjured up memories of pleasure and delight, making it difficult for me to tear strips from the shirt, as I needed to do.

And yet, I recalled to myself very clearly and carefully how Mona Gentile prepared the hammer to bind Signor Paolo, and then did everything as she had done, first pounding the paste of blood not yet whitened that I took from my left breast, holy oil, rosemary, dove feather, and the coals I took from the fire that burned in the hearth on Good Friday, then slathering half of it over the doll, around which I wrapped first Berto's hairs, some strands of the hangman's rope, and a few of my own pubic hairs, and around all that bloodstained pieces of the shirt, then piercing pins into the doll, both to secure the shirt and to bind the powers. And all the while I repeated the chant Mona Gentile had taught me, using Berto's name instead of Signor Paolo Suffrageneo's. And then I made a dough with the rest of the hairs and the paste, and wrapped the shirt around it, in reserve.

And now as I sleep with this doll each night while the moon grows to its fullness, as I stroke and speak to and instruct this doll, more and more of Berto's spirit will be drawn to it, and my own power over it will grow proportionately. I like lying with it between my breasts. It is as though it draws the swollen tenderness out, into itself. Perhaps it even draws some of the power from the milk that is cooking in them. And I like pressing the remains of that beautiful shirt against my cheek, so that I may breathe in Berto's essence, all the night long.

I will ask Mona Gentile when I next see her. If she thinks it will draw power from the child, I will not sleep with my little bird there. Flutter and clatter and clack, little bird. You are indeed mine now!

As the moon grows big, I am becoming most attached to my little toy. I feel less lonely, lying with it pressed tight against my breast. But by the holy tears of Jesus, I know it is no substitute for the real thing. It is an instrument, which contains some of Berto, as much of Berto as I can make it hold. It cannot steal my strength, Mona Gentile says, but rather

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it adds to it. The doll attracts power, and because the doll is mine in creation and possession, the power accrues to me, not to itself, since it is not, properly speaking, an independent entity. If it is stealing power from anyone, that is Berto.

Still, though the doll comforts me, I woke this morning very early, long before lauds, with a terrible fear stalking me, tightening my belly with cramps so overpowering that I feared the birth was coming too early. I remembered my mother speaking to a neighbor, just before my father brought me to the city. She said that "he"—meaning, I think, my father—had decided it was time that Lucia be weaned. And my mother complained that it was too soon, that the baby had only just begun to walk, and that she still could not chew very well. "He wants to get at me again, and then there will be *that* to go through, yet again, and God alone knows whether I'll live through it." And then the women talked about all those they knew who had died in childbed.

Ser Achille's first two wives both died in childbed. But I am not to think of this at all. When Mona Gentile brought me the doll she said that Berto asked after my health. Now is no time for doubt and despair!

What a timid creature I am, to be sure! Last night, because the moon was full, I had to take my courage in my hands and finish making the hammer. Mona Gentile gave me a draught to put in Mona Elissa's wine. Thank the Blessed Mary, it worked! Even so, I could hardly breathe for the trepidation causing my legs to tremble and my breath to strangle in my throat. It is one thing to do magic in Mona Gentile's kitchen, under her direction and auspices, and quite another to do it alone, in a place where I am forbidden by authority to be.

Earlier in the evening, before compline, while it was still light, I went out to the courtyard and softly whistled the birds to me. I was frightened of doing this because some of the shutters facing the courtyard were open. Still, I reminded myself of my determination, and did what I needed to do. I chose the bird that looked to me as though it had the bravest, most Berto-like heart, and coaxed it to me with grain, and then imprisoned it in my hands. How frightened it was! More so than I (and for better reason, too). It tried, naturally, to escape, and even pecked my fingers before I managed to close the remainder of Berto's shirt around it. "Little bird," I crooned to it as I carried it to my room, held closely, under my skirts, to my swelling belly.

"Dear little bird, be mine."

(*Caro ucellino . . .*)

I waited until the house fell into the depths of sleep. Before I did anything, I made sure that Mona Elissa lay sleeping soundly. (Talk about snoring! It is worse even than her singing, which is already the harshest, most grating sound imaginable.) In the kitchen the coals were still warm

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enough for me to use the new pot Mona Gentile had purchased "in the name of the Devil" for melting the holy candle bought "for Isabetta's love of Signor Alberto." (Though the coals had been banked, I kept fearing that the Devil himself might appear, though I had not called him. I think I feared that more than that Mona Elissa would awaken, and find me at work.) While the wax melted, I removed the heart of the bird, spread it with the dough I had already used on the doll, twined a number of my own pubic hairs around it, then poured the wax over it, to seal it. All the while I chanted the spell Mona Gentile had taught me. And when it was finished, I carried the doll and the heart, now wrapped in the remains of the bloodstained shirt, to my room, and kneeling at my prie-dieu, prayed to the Madonna di San Luca that Berto's love be strong enough to make him keep his promise to me.

Mona Gentile took the doll away today. She will place it under the high altar of San Petronio, so that thirty-three masses will be said over it. After that she will give it to Angelica, a servant employed by Berto's father, whom Mona Gentile has bribed. She will secure it within Berto's bed, where it will be most potent.

Holy Madonna, grant me success!

I am overflowing with a great beauty—which I, having taken into my heart and mind, now take part in its radiance! (And this is, indeed, the way of beauty and good, that all that is touched by them reflect them back, as a mirror reflects back light.) For several days now—which seem to pass so slowly, as I wait for the hammer to be fully empowered and placed in Berto's bed—for several days the Signora Messina has begun attending not only compline, but lauds as well, and sits with us when there is shade in the courtyard. Though we are forbidden to speak with her except when absolutely necessary, this is the rule applying to all residents of the house among themselves, and so though the Signora's magnificence strikes us with a consciousness of our lowliness, her presence does not really disturb us. When she sits with us in the courtyard, she reads, silently, from a book she holds in her lap, while the rest of us spin or sew or weave, and some of us sing hymns or other songs to which the matron can find no objection. The day before yesterday the matron, annoyed by our singing (though I do not understand it, except that I think she believes it is her duty to be sure we are all miserable and sober and gloomy, so that our punishment in being here is as oppressive as possible), requested Signora Messina to read aloud to us from her book. The Signora looked at the matron, lifted one of her very fine, silken brows, and then smiled slightly. "It is in Latin," she said. "Will anyone understand it if I read it aloud?"

Did the dottore teach her Latin, or choose her as his wife because she had been schooled in it in her father's house?

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The Signora said also, "But if you like, I will read to you tomorrow, from a book in the vernacular." And I remembered observing when I assisted Mona Gentile in curing the Signora's whites, that she had a number of books in her possession.

So yesterday morning the Signora opened her book, saying, "This was written by the famous cardinal of Pope Leo X, Pietro Bembo." And then she read and read and read, even when her throat grew dry and she required water, and in the late afternoon read again, and came to the passage of such great beauty that even thinking about it now makes my eyes fill with tears of joy and pleasure. The subject of the reading was love, of all things (which greatly embarrassed the prostitutes, who profess a great cynicism about love between men and women). "Surely, if our parents had not loved one another, we would not be here or anywhere else," the Signora read. "Nor, ladies, does love merely bring human beings into existence, but it gives a second life as well—or should I rather call it their principal life—that is the life of virtue, without which it would perhaps be better not to have been born or better to have died at birth." This is beautiful and wise, but the next part is astonishing! "For men would still be wandering up and down the mountains and the woods, as naked, wild and hairy as the beasts, without roofs or human converse or domestic customs, had love not persuaded them to meet together in a common life. Then abandoning their cries and bending their glad tongues to speech, they came to utter their first words. Little by little, as men lived in this new way, love gathered strength, and with love grew the arts. For the first time fathers knew their own children from those of other men. Villages were newly filled with houses, and cities girt themselves with walls for defense, and laws were made to guard praiseworthy customs. Then friendship, which clearly is a form of love, began to sow its hallowed name through lands already civilized."

When the Signora finished reading, I begged her to lend me the book, for though I did not say so, I wanted to learn that passage by heart, so that I would always have that beauty within me, forever. The Signora at first looked surprised, then murmured, "But you are Mona Gentile's apprentice, are you not. Naturally she has taught you to read."

Because some made sly comments about that beautiful passage, the matron coarsely reminded us that not long ago Don Alessandro preached a sermon to us about the Fall, about how God gave Adam and Eve everything, and for her insatiable curiosity and lust, Eve ruined it all—yes, lust, for why else must we learn shame after her sin, which compelled our first parents to put on fig leaves afterward.

But we could all see, so clearly before us, the nobility and worth of the Signora Messina, whose hands are as delicate and white as her face, whose collar and coif-cloth, even on this ordinary day, were of fine spotlessly white lace, and whose dress was so exquisitely stitched with bands

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of silk, her skirts and petticoats so richly full and stiff. And this lady looked utterly calm and unperturbed at Francesca's aspersions, knowing as she did that such a one could never offer any kind of reproach to her. She responded firmly, yet easily: "Pope Leo X thought highly of Cardinal Bembo, who wrote those words." And Adriana tittered, and said maybe so, but her first lover, at thirteen, had been the priest she made her confessions to. At which the matron imposed silence on us, so that the Signora was able to resume reading aloud.

Mona Gentile yesterday sent the message by the portress that she earlier told me would indicate that the hammer had been fully empowered and placed under Berto's bed. And so last night, very late, I undertook the most dangerous part of my mission. I took the sealed heart of the bird wrapped in the remains of Berto's shirt and lay with it pressed to my breast, and then withdrew my spirit from my body. It frightened me a little, abandoning my body defenseless, knowing that if anyone were to come in and move it that I should perish. All previous times I had done it with Mona Gentile watching over it, as I have done for her. Yet I felt a great exhilaration to find myself flying out into the Via Galliera, and from thence to the Via Asse and into the house of Berto's father. It has been so long since I've been out of this house, so long since I have seen anything but plain gray walls! Yet suddenly I could go where I wanted, without hindrance, knowing that I would meet only other spirits, that no one embodied could see me! Of course I did not want to meet other spirits, for often they get themselves into mischief, or engage in terrible battle, as the Benandanti, wielding fennel stalks, do against witches. Happily, though, I met no other spirits, and though I enjoyed lingering in the rooms of Berto's father's house, which are filled with fine furniture, tapestries and many books more than Ser Achille himself owns, the desire to see Berto filled me with an urgency to fly to him with all speed and dispatch.

Berto was lying on his side, sleeping. After I made sure the hammer was placed as Mona Gentile had said it would be, I summoned his spirit, which regarded me in great surprise and confusion. Since Berto had been born without the caule, his spirit lacked the power to rise apart from his body, and so was only the faintest bit evident, trapped as it was in flesh.

"My love," I addressed the spirit, as though it were Berto himself. "You will not remember my visit when you awaken, but you will know, deep within your soul, that I have come to you to urge you to keep your promise to me, to make public your having taken me for your wife. I forbid you to take to your flesh any other, I forbid you any pleasure in your member until you have kept your word to me. A promise is a promise, and no one could make you a better wife than I, who adore and know how to please you, and who will soon be bearing your child. Until you keep your promise to me, you will take no refreshment from your sleep, and

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will dream only of me, and how you now deny the one you once called wife. Sleep now, Berto. But remember, in the morning, that I am your wife."

So great was my delight in seeing my beloved that I remained for some time to look on his face and form, which in sleep resemble those of an angel, until I recalled how defenseless my own sleeping body truly was, lying in my bed in the Casa del Soccorso. Today I can think of nothing but how much I would have loved to have stroked his face with my carnal hand, as I could not, visiting him only in the spirit.

But he will come to me, of that I am certain. It cannot be long now!

We are all in an uproar in this house. The president of the Congregation and Don Anselmo and several members, including the Signor Dottore Segnelli, have been here, to question all of us, and to send the matron and portress away altogether! They have named Mona Elissa as the new matron, and appointed Silvestra Leli to be portress.

It happened this morning, after breakfast, that the Signora Messina and I were both coming down the stairs at the same time, I carrying my work basket, she three books, and a silk, gold thread-embroidered pouch. When we reached the foot of the stairs, she hesitated, and I thought at first she intended to use the privy, but then she said to me that she wished to have a word with the portress. This surprised me, for usually she did not deign to notice that woman. And so I supposed that the Signora intended to bribe her to carry a message outside. Shamelessly I lingered, out of curiosity (though I did not tell the signori that!), to see if Mona Antonia could be bribed. But what happened was this: when the Signora had almost reached the portress's bench, she dropped her books. While the Signora exclaimed loudly, the portress bent over, to pick them up. And quickly, to my astonishment, the Signora raised the pouch high over her head, and then brought it down with great force and violence on the portress's head! The portress gasped, and collapsed. The Signora then unbarred and unbolted the door, and glancing over her shoulder, saw me standing there, and so called softly to me to escape with her, if I liked!

Oh the tightness in my chest at that moment! Oh the tears choking my throat and prickling my eyelids! The thought of freedom was sweet—but even without a moment's reflection I knew that the cost would be too high. I would lose everything if I fled, I would lose Berto, I would lose Mona Gentile, I would lose all chance of restoring my honor. If I fled, I would either end up in the Casa della Probazione, or as the meanest whore on the streets—and so far advanced in my pregnancy, too! So I shook my head, to let her know that I would not go. And then the doorway stood empty.

I knelt by Mona Antonia, who was groaning. Her eyelids fluttered, and then opened, and then closed again as a great moan issued from her. I

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lingered at her side, so as to delay going to the matron, who I knew would set up a great hue and cry. But when I saw a trickle of blood coming out of Mona Antonia's nose, I knew that I must get help for her at once, and ceased to delay.

I do not know if they will apprehend the Signora. If she has money, and people who will help her despite her husband's wishes, she will probably escape. Everyone here is both excited, and gloomy. It will be dull again here without the Signora's beauty and finery to lighten our days. And we can all guess that Mona Elissa will be harsh in enforcing her piety on us. Catarina whispered to me as we were entering the chapel for compline that we will be lucky if she doesn't start making us get up in the middle of night for matins!

I have been so dull, and have been so oppressed with the burden of pregnancy, that I haven't felt any desire to chatter, much less write in this little book. Mona Gentile says that Berto is suffering greatly—that he seems to be literally wasting away. He has no appetite. A doctor was called, and said that he lacked sufficient heat (which he said was probably caused by dissipated living). The doctor bled him, and purged him, and gave him an emetic, and put him on a strict regimen.

Every now and then I send my spirit to Berto, to bid him to keep his promise. How can he be so stubborn? I do not understand it, since to keep his word to me will bring him everything that is good, while resistance is making him ill, and less than a man.

It is sad. But my love will prevail, and be justified.

"You must decide how far you want to go," Mona Gentile told me this morning. Angelica, the servant she bribed, came to her, deeply distressed by Berto's debilitation. She wishes the hammer removed because she thinks Berto may die of it.

These words, when Mona Gentile conveyed them to me, struck terror deep into my heart. Surely he will not die! I said to her, begging her reassurance. But Mona Gentile said, "He has indeed become ill. His spirit is resisting the hammer, and may even resist it unto death. It may be that the love, or even desire, that you wished to bind no longer existed at the time you made the hammer. If there is no love, nor even desire, the spirit cannot be compelled, though it dies resisting your will to bind it."

Do I wish Berto to die? No, a thousand times no! Though I am sometimes angry at him for having abandoned me, his promised wife, I am a woman, not a man, who would rather see his beloved dead than leave him. Unwomanly revenge could never be my way.

And so, Mona Gentile says, I must either decide to release him, or go to the Devil, that he may be inspired with the love that he no longer feels. But if I go to the Devil for such a purpose, it will cost me dearly. It will

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cost me, no doubt, my soul. For the Devil never performs such arduous feats but for the ultimate price.

I ponder these things. A few months ago, before I began to contemplate the risks of childbed, I might have cast my soul to the winds, to win Berto to me. I can think of nothing more important to me! And yet—when I think of how I may well perish in the struggle to be delivered of this child, I feel fearful for my immortal soul.

Don Tomaso has warned that in the practice of magic one must be careful not to endanger her soul. When I threw the pinch of salt into the fire today, not only the Devil's eyes, but most of his face manifested itself to my sight. My heart almost failed when I saw it, and I trembled so violently I collapsed right there in the kitchen, and had to be assisted by Catarina, who being a silly fearful thing, believed I was beginning my pains. Fear has become my shadow. For I do not know what I will do. I cannot face losing Berto, either to death, or to his indifference. But do I wish to lose my soul to regain him? Alas! I must be the most unhappy woman alive!

If Mona Elissa was a disagreeable old scold before, she is now an insufferable tyrant. Daily she rages at all of us—and lately I've become the favorite target of her fury. Yesterday when I nodded over my spindle, she shrieked at me that I should not be sitting about idle, that a "strapping great girl like me" ought to be doing all the hardest work in the house, instead of none at all. And it especially annoys her that I have become so large and clumsy that I need help getting up from my knees in chapel. "Putting on airs, as though noble and delicate blood flows through your veins, when you and I both know your mother worked in the fields through all her pregnancies. You are nothing but a concubine who got herself dismissed for getting pregnant. Idleness is not for such as you!" And though Ser Achille pays the full "extraordinary" board for me, and the Signora Consolini would be angry to hear of it, Mona Elissa persists in trying to put me to work with the residents too poor to pay maintenance. But it's obvious she hates the Signora Consolini—and since the Signora Messina's escape has loudly proclaimed that the Congregation put her in charge, that members' wives have no authority in the house, and that many of them are no better than they should be.

Other examples of her officiousness: last week when Anna and Angela quarreled over whose turn it was to clean out the chamber pots in the dormitory, and not only screamed invectives at one another but began hair-pulling and other sorts of disorderly behavior typical of whores, Mona Elissa went and fetched the cudgel the Congregation gave to the new portress so as to prevent any further escapes, and beat both women about the shoulders and haunches, in a rage at their creating disorder in this house, which she called "honest."

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And then today she came in here to inspect my room, to see that it was "in order." When she saw the one book that I own, a gift from Don Tomaso, she demanded to know what it was. When I told her it was *Il Legendario de Santi,* she was suspicious, as though she thought I might be lying to her, and opened it at random and ordered me to read from it. The page she opened to was a description of the martyrdom of Saint Perpetua. Talk about fury! That one, it turns out, was enraged that a book should praise that saint, who Mona Elissa said was a shameful example to all decent women, for having deserted her husband and child and disobeyed her parents for the glory of martyrdom, because she was so full of herself. Clearly Mona Elissa can have no respect for any of the women saints, since no woman, other than Mary, was ever sainted for bearing children and being a good wife and daughter!

And then she saw this little book, and seeing that it had script in it asked me what it was. I said that it was a book Don Tomaso had given me for making observations on my devotional progress. (That is what such little notebooks are usually used for, and since Mona Elissa cannot read, I did not fear my lie being exposed.) Mona Elissa snorted, and said that it was a bad thing, making women too full of their own importance, there being so many women these days writing at their confessors' request, and taking their souls so seriously, which had previously not been necessary, when simply going to mass and confession and saying one's prayers sufficed.

Soon Mona Gentile will come, and I will have to give her my decision. Time is running out—both for Berto, and for me, since my labor will begin any day now. I fear it is not a good thing to send my spirit out from my body when the baby is so active and lively within me. And yet, before I can make my decision, I must speak with Berto's spirit. I must know why he has spurned me. Perhaps it is because his father has forbidden him, or his mother has made him promise to break his word to me.

I wish for a sign, to tell me what I must do. No method of divination I have tried yet has given me one. I pray that this night will show me the way.

I would not have believed it was possible to be more unhappy than I have been these past months that I have been living in this house. Nor would I ever have believed it possible that the spirit of vengeance and outrage, such as that motivates men to kill their own wives and other men when their honor is threatened, could move me. And yet both these things have come to pass. Oh miserable girl, who thinks now of the Devil, lurking in the hearth, eager to become her lord, though he is such a low, mean creature, who must skulk in out of the way places, such a miserable power who has never had even one altar raised to him, much less a church. . . .

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The pain in my breast is a coldness, that makes all of my body ache with the most forsaken emptiness. And this though my breasts and womb are full past belief!

I parted my spirit from my body last night, and flew to the Via Asse to see Berto. An old woman sat at his bedside, continually replacing wet cloths on his head which, his head whipping constantly about, were again and again dislodged. His breathing was harsh and difficult, full of hoarse cries and whimpers such as I have never heard. His face was pale and wasted, and his eyes, which were open, stared wildly about, without apparently seeing anything. My heart was wrung with pity and remorse for what I had brought on him.

I almost left his bedside then, determined to free him from the power of my hammer. But I could not refrain from speaking to his spirit, certain, as I was, that it would be the last time we met, face to face. So I summoned his spirit, and bidding it speak truthfully—which it could not help but do, since it was obeying my summons—I demanded of him whether any trace of love for me remained in his heart.

The spirit laughed raucously and shrilly, as though untouched by the weakness of the body it inhabits. "Love!" it scoffed. "I set out to give you the trick, and I succeeded. I even made a wager with Rico that I would. I possessed you for months—and now will even get a child from you! What a fool you were, thinking you could snare the son of a high magistrate with your body, thinking that the man whose mother is the daughter of a long line of noted bankers would throw his family's magnificent honor away on you, you with generations of mud under your fingernails, your father and his father before him bred like oxen for the fields. You! You are nothing! Nothing!"

(*Sei niente! Niente!*)

Though my body lay some distance away, it was as though Berto had plunged a knife into my heart. But even more than the pain, I burned with a sudden frigid anger, like a piece of smoking ice within my belly, for never even in my darkest moments had I believed Ser Achille, or the truth of the terrible dream, that my beloved had deliberately set out to give me the trick. Nothing, he called me. And the word reverberated in me, and it seemed to me that I was indeed nothing, a hollow being, whose spirit would blow away now that her heart had been stolen from her.

I do not know what happened then. A kind of red mist obscures my memory; I only remember later, lying in my bed, plotting Berto's destruction, plotting his father's destruction, plotting even the destruction of his mother's so-magnificent kinsmen. The Devil could be summoned, he was nearby. This thought rang through my mind, like a bell that will not be silenced. Like a bell tolling a death. Like the bell of doom.

I dozed a little. Later, during lauds, I thought about the consequences of doing such great business with the Devil. In that little chapel, our Lord

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Jesus looks pathetic hanging on his cross. And so as I knelt, facing the crucifix, the words of Antonio, the journeyman of the baker in the Via Sarogozza, came to me, arguing that Jesus was too powerless to have been a real lord, or he would not have been crucified, but was just the illegitimate son of a cuckolded carpenter, and that there is no hell, for there is no heaven, because there is only death, and then nothing. And yet—I kept thinking, in argument with myself—the Devil is even less impressive, and commands no respect at all, anywhere. What truly powerful lord lurks about, waiting for even the meanest of servants to summon him to do business?

The initial fierceness of my rage has cooled, leaving me doubtful that I want to exchange my soul for vengeance. Still, what joy it would bring me to triumph over Berto, to command his every obedience, even if it meant incurring his eternal hatred! I was willing to do anything to please him—and I did—but that for love, for which he now scorns me, as though love were worthless.

Per dio. I wish Mona Gentile had come today. I am tired, and sick, of the tolling of that bell in my head. I could die in childbed tonight, or tomorrow or the next day. And if I pledge my soul to the devil, I could be in hell before I even saw my vengeance carried out.

By the blessed tears of Jesus, this book of mine is a near ruin. A great storm came in the night and because I had left the shutters open on account of the terrible close heat, the rain poured into the room, soaking my little book, as well as my *Legendario de Santi.* The printed book is not nearly as soaked, because the leather of its covers protected it; and though some of its pages are damp, and far more costly than the cheap paper of my little book, they will dry unscathed. My little book, though, is a disgrace. The soot I have been using for ink smeared over the pages horribly, blurring my already ugly hand. Even as I write now with such difficulty because of the dampness of the paper, I see my writing as Ser Achille himself would see it: ugly, misshapen, a blur of soot marring what was once good (if cheap) clean paper.

It strikes me, like a sign: if writing is the mirror of the soul, then mine is misshapen and deformed, a veritable blot on Creation.

Love—yes, today, it is on my mind. I was reminded of the passage I learned by heart, read to us by the Signora Messina. To think of it redoubles my pain. We made a child, Berto and I, a child he will own. And yet—what of love? The only love was mine, and that was a delusion, conceived, birthed, and nursed by him.

And still—I feel in my heart which is otherwise a cold hollow thing, the beauty of the love there described. I am nothing, my love simply derisory, according to Berto. Perhaps. But perhaps, too, it is simply that Berto's

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soul is too small, or I wholly unworthy of inspiring love in anyone. Is my soul truly so deformed as this little book now tells me? Is it as good as given to the Devil, whatever I decide? What is the meaning of the sign that this little book has given me? What does it mean that even as I scrawl on these damp pages, the writing blurs into stains and lumps of soot?

And now I write one last time in this book, to make it complete, before burning it in the fire, to make pure what has been vile and ugly.

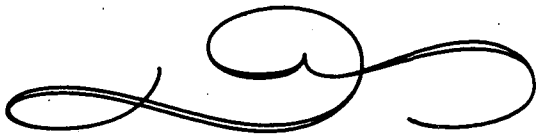
When Mona Gentile came to me today I related to her all that Berto's spirit had said to me, and told her how I had thrown the bird's heart into the kitchen fire and released Berto from the hammer. Mona Gentile then embraced me as tenderly as I have ever known her to do, and kissed my cheeks many times, saying that she was gratified, and happy at my decision. Her eyes became bright, and shone with emotion, and even filled with tears of wonderful sincerity. I was surprised, because she had never said that releasing Berto would please her, and asked her why she hadn't. "There are some lessons that cannot be taught, but only learned through experience," she said. "Many are the women who become so possessed by the desire to be desired, that they lose the whole world in their effort to achieve it. There is nothing to be done for those so possessed. Nothing else can matter to them, and indeed the world is lost to them. You have learned now for yourself that sometimes our spells to bind have the effect of binding *us*, who cast them, just as closely and relentlessly as those we seek to bind. Magic is strong and powerful. And now we know that you are strong enough and powerful enough to become a master of it."

And though my heart did not cease to be bitterly grieved and bruised, yet Mona Gentile's rejoicing, and her teaching me a lesson I had not known I was learning, filled up the emptiness that Berto's spirit had hollowed out when he said that I was nothing.

I am ready to become a healer, Mona Gentile says. And there is nothing more powerful that any woman can be, except for queens and consorts of dukes and princes. That is, I know, true. Only what of love, I wonder? What of the great thing called love that has civilized man?

When I asked Mona Gentile, she smiled, and patted my hand, and said "Child, this is not a question for a girl of seventeen years to ask. Be patient. And perhaps, when you are twice your years, *you* will be able to tell *me*."

And so goodbye, little book, goodbye. Our time together is over. ●



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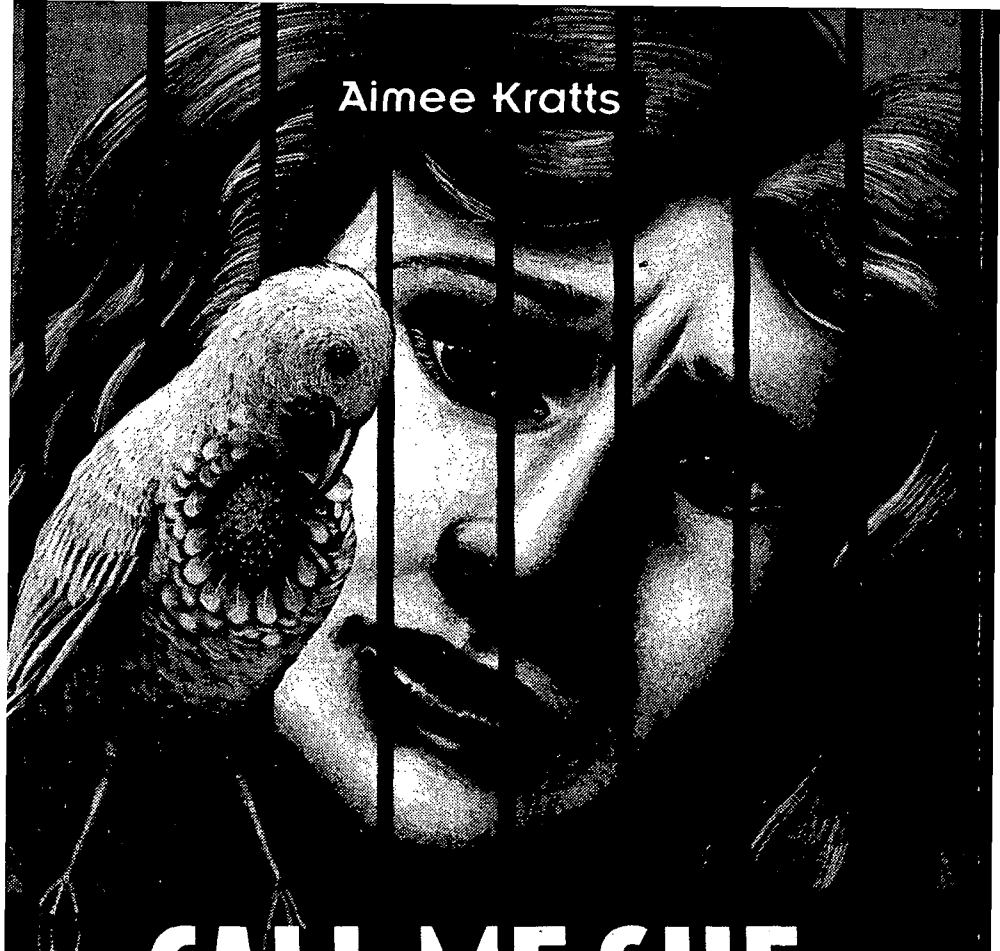

Aimee Kratts

CALL ME SUE

The author is a technical writer who lives and works in a suburb of Washington, DC. Ms. Kratts, a graduate of the 1992 Clarion Writers Workshop, has written one novel and is working on a second one. Although she has sold her short fiction to a few other markets, Ms. Kratts's hilarious "Call Me Sue" is her first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Alan M. Clark

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My white mynah bird, Shelby, plucked another feather from her nearly naked breast, dropped it on the cage floor, and said, "Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk!"

That was the last straw. I had had a frustrating day at the office and an extra-long commute to my new home in the suburbs. I was in a rage over my idiot boss, too many unnecessary crises, Quentin stealing my paper clips again, and some idiot kid whose car caught on fire on the toll road and caused a back-up. I was sure that I was going to die of apoplexy because of my blood pressure before I had a chance to have another heart attack.

When I got to my parking space, I slammed my car door, stalked to the mailboxes to get my mail addressed to "resident" (smiling through clenched teeth at the neighbor's child as she ran over my foot with her plastic unicorn bike), walked back to the town house, opened the door, shut it firmly, flipped the dead bolt, and threw my purse the length of the house into the kitchen, hitting the telephone, knocking it off the counter and making the bell ring.

And there was Shelby, dying, and I didn't have the energy to deal with the poor thing. The vet said that she was suffering a depression from lack of attention and I should be a better pet owner. I just never seemed to have the time.

"Beat me, whip me, call me Sue," she said sadly. "Awk!"

"Oh, for the love of Christ!"

"Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk. Call me Sue."

"*Sue!*"

That's when the first ghost appeared. He just materialized in front of my fireplace, a drink in one huge hand, the other hand smoothing his long black hair. His dark suit was a style that I had never seen, although, by the cut of it, I imagined that he must be rich. He had the consistency of a grainy black-and-white photo.

"Oh, my!" he said, and put his drink on a mantle I couldn't see. It promptly dematerialized when he released it. He looked at me, half curious, half disbelieving. "Ferimond, dear," he said to someone I couldn't see, "something's happened. Please keep the guests out of the library."

To me he nodded and said, "Hello. My name is Aloysius Zellerbach."

I stumbled backward in fear and sat down hard on my couch. I was too shocked to say anything, and, after a polite pause, he continued. "You'd be much more attractive if you didn't display your silver fillings to a man the first time you meet him."

There was a strange man in my house, and he wasn't only a strange man, he was a *ghost*. I decided that it would take far less energy to pretend this was normal than to admit it was another crisis.

I focused on the compliment. Attractive? I am thirty-three years old, short, round, have green eyes, and thick, red hair. My fish-belly-white skin might be attractive to a vampire, maybe.

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He gave another tilt of the head, this one for impatience. "What's your name, dear?"

"My? I . . . uh . . . it's Mary Magdalene McGoldrick."

"Ah. Your mother was either a blasphemous heretic or a writer. Or both."

"She's Catholic."

"Ah." He looked around my living room, taking in the cheap Swedish furniture, the wooden lamps, the electric piano (my roommate's), the desk, the PC, and my old couch. He chewed on his lip, obviously trying to think of something socially appropriate to say to sum up the room. "How quaint."

I was starting not to like him. "Mr. Zellerbach—"

"It's 'Dr.' Zellerbach, dear."

I finished up not liking him and started on becoming really annoyed by him. "Dr. Zellerbach, what exactly are you doing in my living room?"

"I'm not in your living room. You seem to have moved the entire contents of your quaint little living area into my library."

"You're in *my* house, and I'd like you to leave!"

"As much as I'd love to keep company with you and your lovely fillings, Ms. McGoldrick, I, too, wish you would leave. I have a party to attend, and I'm scheduled to channel Ethly Mermin this evening. She's *terribly* difficult to do, that lovely soprano voice she had is so hard to—"

"Ethel."

"What?"

"Her *name* is *Ethel* Merman. And she wasn't a soprano. She was a contralto. And she belted songs, she didn't sing them."

I was pleased to see that Dr. Zellerbach was becoming equally annoyed with me. "Ms. McGoldrick, I'd appreciate—"

Just then, my roommate opened the front door, her thick glasses dangling from a sting around her neck. "Who're you talking to, McGoldrick?"

I looked from Dr. Zellerbach to Jennifer, and back to an empty hearth. Stunned, I said, "Myself. I'm trying to determine if stress can cause hallucinations." Jennifer is my dearest friend in the world, and so incredibly relaxed that I hate her for it. "I'm also trying to figure out how people get the idea that car maintenance happens by magic. They think the oil fairies just come by once every six months and do maintenance on their engines. And when the fairies *don't* come by, for lack of an offering of beer or drugs, their cars catch on fire on the toll road and cause a back-up, screwing up the commute home for everyone else."

"I see," she said as she carried an armful of groceries into the kitchen. "Did you ask Quentin out yet?"

"No. And he wouldn't go out with me anyway, he's too good-looking. Besides, he likes square dancing and you know I don't dance. And I don't have time for relationships."

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"A date is not a relationship."

"Drop it."

"Okay." She paused. "By the way, you may want to take a look outside. There's a strange woman in a lab coat admiring the bugs on your flowers."

"What?"

I raised the shade of the front bay window and looked outside. She was right. A heavyset, grainy woman with short hair and a clipboard was on her knees studying my flowers. Children were beginning to gather on the sidewalk to watch her. I had to get her into my home before she aroused suspicion. I opened the window. "Ma'am? Would you please step into the house?"

"What? Your house?" She looked at me and then at where my house should be. "I don't see a doorway. Besides, you're in my laboratory. Where did you get these fabulous preying mantises? They're extinct, and have been for years."

I slammed the window shut and opened the front door to get her. She was gone.

"McGoldrick!"

I went back into the house to answer Jennifer. She was yelling from her room upstairs. "Yeah, I hear you. What do you want?"

"I just saw a man in my bed!"

"Wishful thinking, Jents!"

"No, really! He was gorgeous! But then he disappeared. . . ." she paused.

I crossed my fingers and asked, "Did you have your glasses on?"

"No. But I saw something. He was . . . oh, forget it. I guess I'm just tired." She came back downstairs, fumbling with her glasses. I grasped her elbow and ushered her out the front door. "Hey!"

"Why don't you run over to the drive-thru at McDonald's and get us some dinner? I'll go get you a couple of dollars. Wait here."

"Sure," she said. She gave me the "You need to RELAX" look.

As I ran back though the living room to get my purse, Dr. Zellerbach appeared in front of the fireplace, singing "GOD BLESS AMERICA! LAND THAT I SHOVE!" accompanied by an unseen grand piano. His arms gestured expansively at my empty couch.

"You've channeled *Kate Smith,* you quack!" I yelled at him on my way by. "And it's 'love'!"

I got the money, opened the front door a crack, and gave it to Jennifer. When I heard the car pulling away, I went to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. While I was facing the counter, I heard a woman clear her throat behind me. Deciding rather late in the day that I was having a nervous breakdown, I ignored her, hoping, like an idiot, that she'd go away.

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"Miss?"

Giving up, I turned around and said, "Yes?"

She was a young woman, about thirty-ish, with long, glossy black hair, gray eyes, and dark skin. She wore a jumpsuit of neon yellow with black spiderweb patterns radiating from the knees, which was fine. There was something in her left hand the size of a small notepad, except that it was white and shiny and had lights. That was fine too. What I didn't like about her was that she looked like she felt very sorry for me. And, whereas everyone else was a black-and-white ghost, she was in color.

"I'm Julie Wong."

"Pleased to meet you, Julie. I'm Mary Magdalene McGoldrick. Why are you in my kitchen?"

"Mary Magdalene. Hm. Was your mother a writer?"

"No, she was a heretic."

"Ah, yes, well, Ms. McGoldrick, I'm sorry to tell you that you've inadvertently performed the S.O.E."

"S.O.E.?"

"The Sequence of Events."

"What's the Sequence of Events?"

"This may be a little hard to believe," she said, waving her hands around the kitchen, "but your house is located at the mathematical center of all time and matter for the Universe—the Universal Mass Nexus, as we call it in the business."

"What in the heck are you talking about?"

"Your house—your kitchen, to be precise—is the Universal Mass Nexus. And you've inadvertently hit upon the proper sequence of events and sounds that starts the collapse of all time and matter."

"Into my house?"

"Into your kitchen."

I walked over to the sliding glass doors and opened them for a breath of autumn air. My next-door neighbor Barbara was raking the leaves on her back lawn while her cat played in them. "Barbara, you'd better hurry up with that raking job. All time and matter is collapsing into my kitchen, and you don't want your yard messy when people start arriving."

Barbara leaned on her rake and said, "Did someone steal all your paper clips again?"

I slid the door shut as hard as I thought I could without breaking the glass.

"So time and matter are collapsing into my new kitchen, and onto my new appliances and my new dining room set." I sat down on my new chair cushion, took some new aspirin out of the pillbox I keep in my pocket and swallowed them without water. "Assuming that this isn't some monster joke that someone is pulling on me, where do you people come from?"

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"We're from the future."

"I thought ghosts were from the past."

"We're not ghosts, Ms. McGoldrick. We're people, just like you. You're just pulling us into your time."

"Why don't I see anything from the past?"

"There weren't many people living on this location before you. You might see a Native American or two, but I doubt it."

"What can I do to fix this collapsing time and matter situation?"

"Actually, it's corrected quite easily. All you have to do is boil an eye of newt and tongue of bat. . . ." She trailed off.

"I'm not laughing."

"Sorry. All you have to do is perform the S.O.E. again, in the same order, of course."

"Of course." Immediately, I tried to piece together what I had been doing all day. Impossible. "How far back does this Sequence of Events go?"

"There's been a bit of debate over that."

I started to rub one of my temples. "Can you give me a rough estimate?"

She consulted the white object in her hand. "I think you'll be fine if you start when you parked your vehicle in your space."

"Okay. I'll start then. How accurate do I have to be?"

"Only 86 percent."

"What can I get wrong?"

"I wouldn't plan on getting anything wrong."

"You were sent here by that kid whose car caught on fire on the toll road, weren't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're his skiing instructor or something, right?"

"Ms. McGoldrick, I know this has to be difficult for you, but I—"

"I know, the National Institutes of Health put you on my trail to track me just because I had a heart attack at a young age. You're here to see if I'm one of those women statistics who are starting to have heart attacks from stress at the same age as men."

"GOD BLESS AMERICA! LAND THAT I SHOVE! STAND BEHIND HER! AND—"

"It's 'BESIDE HER!' you idiot!" I screamed toward the living room.

"Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk!"

"Excuse me, Ms. Wong, but I must go outside into the silence now."

"It's 'Dr. Wong,' actually."

"Goodbye."

As she faded, I heard the front door slam. I went through the living room and took one of the bags from Jennifer.

"Jennifer, we have to talk."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to sweep out behind the washer and dryer this morning. I ran out of time. I'll do it tonight."

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"What? Oh. No. I wasn't even thinking of that. There's something going on with the house that you need to know about."

Shelby was a naked little bird corpse the next morning, swinging from her perch by one rigored little foot. She'd plucked out her remaining feathers during the night. I felt horrible that I hadn't paid her more attention. What was worse was that, somehow, I had to acquire another mynah bird who could say, "Beat me, whip me, call me Sue" by the end of the day in order for the S.O.E. to take place. Somehow, I didn't think that I was going to meet up with another gay couple from D.C. who was moving and wanted to get rid of their mynah bird by five o'clock on a Saturday evening. Shelby had been unique.

I did manage to find a black mynah bird named Angel, however, very early in the morning. Now all I had to do was wait for my friend Timothy to come by and give the bird a crash course in stupid sayings. I wanted him to hurry, because everyone was now appearing in color.

Later in the morning, a child in a silver space suit was fingering the priceless Baltimore Album quilt I had hanging on the wall in the living room.

"Don't touch that! My mother made that! Leave it alone!"

He jerked his fingers away and then faded, sticking his tongue out at me the whole time.

Around eleven-thirty, Julie Wong appeared in my kitchen, looking more sorry for me than ever.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, Ms. McGoldrick."

"Call me Mary. After all, we are going to be sharing the same time and matter pretty soon."

"Mary, it's the bird. It won't do."

"Why not?"

"It's not the same color as Shelby."

"So what if it's black? It's a mynah bird, isn't it?"

"But it has to be white."

"Why?"

"The sound that is made by a white mynah is better, uh, more mathematically precise than the sound made by a black mynah."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all. I rubbed my temples. "Well, my friend Timothy is on his way here to teach the bird how to talk, so I'll just have to cope."

Timothy, all six-foot-five, three hundred and fifty pounds of him, dressed in a purple kimono that day, sat on my couch and pulled the cage close so that he sat with his nose one inch from Angel's. He was a reformed prison guard from Sing Sing with a talent for mimicking voices. "Beat me," he said to the bird.

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The bird rolled its eyes and shifted its grip on the perch. "Awk?" it said uneasily.

"Beat me."

"Awk?"

"Mary, you're an educated woman. You know there's no way I can teach a bird to speak in five hours."

"Timothy, you've *got* to!"

A phantom harlequin leapt out of the wood of my front door, held a torch to his mouth and blew ghost fire at my smoke alarm and bounded off toward the kitchen. I ignored him as best I could until the alarm went off. Then I panicked. Jumping up on the couch, I turned the alarm off and felt the ceiling. No burn marks, but it was very warm.

"Timothy, keep trying, please."

He shook his head and looked at Angel. "Beat me."

A teenage boy faded into view, cross-legged, in the middle of the living room floor. He was chanting like a monk. I tried to walk through him and ended up walking into him. "If you have to be here," I said, "sit off to one side. You're blocking the path."

He crawled over to the edge of the room, without uncrossing his legs, and continued to chant.

I got a headache. The kind that feels like someone has taken an axe to your forehead but left you alive to feel the pain. And, as if he could sense it across time and space, Dr. Zellerbach materialized in front of my fireplace in mid-channel.

"DON'T CRY FOR ME NICARAGUA! THE TRUTH IS—"

"The truth is, it's ARGENTINA, you jackass!"

"Beat me!"

"Awk?"

The only way to remain sane was to escape to the kitchen, so I did. There I happened to see myself, another me, with gray hair, sitting at the table, eating cake and reading a book. I never have time to read! And what was *I* doing sitting there anyway?

"Hey! Don't eat that, you'll get fat."

I looked at me. "So?"

"Are you really me? And if so, what are you doing in my kitchen? You obviously don't belong here for years."

"You need to relax, or you're going to give yourself another heart attack. Did you get around to asking Quentin out yet? I can't remember."

"I'm relaxed! And *no!* It's none of your business anyway!"

"If you say so." I went back to my cake.

The phone rang. "Hello?"

"Mary?" It was Quentin!

"Yes."

"Hi, it's Quentin."

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"Quentin who?"

"Quentin Everett."

"Yes?"

"I just called to apologize."

"For what?"

"The paper clips. I'm the one who took them."

"You took my paper clips? I hadn't even noticed."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry. I hear it drives you nuts. I was just, uh, trying to get you to come over and chew me out. Then I could, uh, ask you out to make up for it. But you haven't, and so I thought I should call."

"Uh huh."

"Brilliant," said the me at the table. "Brilliant, witty conversation."

"So, would you like to go out tonight?" Quentin asked.

Dr. Zellerbach walked into the kitchen singing in baritone, "I DON'T KNOW HOW TO LUH-UVE HIM! WHAT TO DO, HOW TO PROVE HIM."

I covered the mouthpiece. "Shut up, Zellerbach! It's not 'prove,' anyway!"

"Mary?" said Quentin.

"Uh, well, I'm kind of busy tonight. Maybe next weekend."

"Oh, sure, I understand. Well, see you Monday."

"Yeah, Monday. Bye."

He hung up.

"You moron." I jumped at my roommate's voice. She was leaning against the kitchen wall behind me with Dr. Zellerbach superimposed on her. They both looked at me thoughtfully. "Now he thinks you're not interested!"

I lied. "I'm not. I'm too busy."

"Too busy freaking out over work and having heart attacks."

"I've only had one, so leave me alone!"

She shrugged and walked by me out onto the back deck. I followed her.

"You've got to help me with the Sequence of Events."

"You don't need my help. You never do."

I looked at the ground. It was true. I always insisted on doing things myself. This time was different, however. And I was ready to prostrate myself if I had to. "Jennifer, I do need you. Help me out with this, please?"

"You have to do something in return."

"Anything!"

"Go out with Quentin."

I paused, and she raised an eyebrow. "Okay. I'll go out with Quentin." I told myself that I had no intention of really doing so.

"Good. Now, what do I have to do?"

Jennifer's part was to make sure that the little girl with the plastic uni-

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corn bike came riding down the sidewalk and over my foot at just the right time. I don't know what she told the girl's mother, but whatever it was, it seemed to work. She had charge of the girl at four-forty-five.

Timothy was sitting in the living room next to Angel, coaching her. She wasn't doing well.

"Beat me, awk, Sue, awk, you jackass Zellerbach! Awk!"

Zellerbach was singing, "QUE SERA SERA, WHOEVER HAS FLEAS WILL BE!" The future me was in the kitchen, making shortbread. Julie, dressed in pink spandex this evening, was helping her. There was another circus performer dancing to organ music on the stairs going up to the bedroom, and there was a mother I had never seen before reading to her children on the stairs going down into the rec room. Phantom trees appeared throughout the house and the sound of tree frogs almost covered Zellerbach's caterwauling.

Purse in hand, I went outside and shut the front door behind me. It almost drowned out the noise. I got into the car, pulled out of the parking lot, drove a block, and came back.

The Sequence of Events: Pull into my parking space. Slam the car door. Walk to the mailboxes. Smile at the child as she runs over my foot. Walk back to the house. Open the door. Zellerbach was singing in Ethel Merman's voice, "WHEN THE MOON IS IN THE MONKEY HOUSE! AND JUPITER ARRIVES WITH MARS!" And there were the sounds of tree frogs and crickets and circus organ music and the buzzer in the kitchen going off for the shortbread. Shut the door firmly. Flip the dead bolt. Throw my purse the length of the house into the kitchen aiming for the telephone. Hit the telephone and knock it off the counter and make the bell ring.

I looked at Angel. Speak, I prayed. She said nothing, and started to groom herself. I looked at Timothy in a panic, afraid to say anything. Timothy smiled beatifically and said, "Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk!" He sounded just like Shelby!

I almost giggled.

"Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk!"

"Oh, for the love of Christ!"

"Beat me, whip me, call me Sue. Awk. Call me Sue."

"*Sue!*"

And the house was empty. Except for a silence more heavy than anything I'd ever witnessed. I was surprised that Timothy hadn't disappeared, too.

I sat on the couch while Timothy went outside to get Jennifer. The hearth was empty. There was no me in the kitchen. The living room was spotless, even though it had been occupied continuously for twenty-four hours by more people than I have ever had in any place that I'd ever lived. The rocking chair was in its place. The trees were gone. The frogs

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were silent. The only sound was the insistent beeping of the phone's receiver, demanding to be put back into its cradle.

Jennifer poked her head through the doorway. "I'm going out to eat Chinese with Timothy. I thought you'd like to have your house to yourself for awhile."

"You don't have—"

"See you!" she said cheerfully, and shut the door.

The silence was amazingly loud now.

Not quite sure what to do next, I hung the telephone up, then checked the bedrooms upstairs. Empty. Clean. The rec room downstairs. Empty. Clean. The basement, the same. Even the closets.

Feeling listless, I went into the kitchen and sat down. Then I went back into the living room and stared at the fireplace. I wondered if Zellerbach ever channeled Judy Garland.

Suddenly, I heard someone singing upstairs. Zellerbach! I bounded up the stairs. It was coming from Jennifer's room. I threw the door open, and was disappointed to see that it was just her alarm going off at five-forty-five, twelve hours out of sync. She always did that to me. I started to set it to the correct time, and then, I just stopped.

She was out having dinner with Timothy, and I was sitting in her bedroom on a Saturday night, adjusting her alarm clock for her.

The company home-phone list was posted on the refrigerator in case of a work emergency. Quentin's name was in the middle of the list.

I dialed.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello, Quentin?"

"Yes?"

"It's Mary McGoldrick." ●

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READERS' AWARD RESULTS (continued from page 11)

POEM (continued)

5. Astronaut Boneyard, Wendy Rathbone (tie)
5. Love-Song of the Holo-Celebs, Bruce Boston (tie)
6. Day Omega, W. Gregory Stewart
7. Dragon Skin, W. Gregory Stewart
8. Dodoes, Steven Utley
9. In Memoriam: For a Colleague, Departed, Tom Disch
10. Pteranodon, Steven Utley

COVER ARTIST

1. WOJTEK SIUDMAK

2. Bob Eggleton
3. Paul Youll
4. Fred Gambino
5. Kinuko Y. Craft
6. Todd Lockwood
7. Keith Scaife

INTERIOR ARTIST

1. DARRYL ELLIOTT

2. Laurie Harden
3. Steve Cavallo
4. John Stevens
5. Todd Lockwood
6. George H. Krauter
7. Ron Chironna
8. Alan M. Clark
9. Dell Harris
10. Mike Aspengren

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog*'s Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 19, 1997, during a breakfast at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, where we had gathered to attend SFWA's Nebula Banquet weekend. The breakfast was presided over by the editorial director of Penny Press, Fran Danon. Each winner received a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, Mary Rosenblum and Robert Reed were on hand to accept their Readers' Awards. Other notables present at breakfast included Charles N. Brown, editor of *Locus*, Beth Gwinn, *Locus* photographer, Sheila Williams, past Readers' Award-winner Connie Willis, and her daughter Cordelia Willis. Later that evening, at the Banquet, Jack Dann was judged the winner of the Novella Nebula Award for his *Asimov's* story, "Da Vinci Rising." We partied on afterward long into the night, and lifted up our voices and made that night hideous with song—until hotel security showed up, anyway!

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Gwyneth Jones

BALINESE DANCER

An ordinary family vacation through the French countryside takes an unexpected and unnerving twist, in British writer Gwyneth Jones's new tale. This distinguished author has been an Arthur C. Clarke Award finalist, the co-winner of the James Tiptree Award, and the winner of two World Fantasy Awards. The trade paperback edition of her novel *North Wind* will be out from Tor in December, and they will be publishing her next book, *Phoenix Cafe*, sometime in 1998.

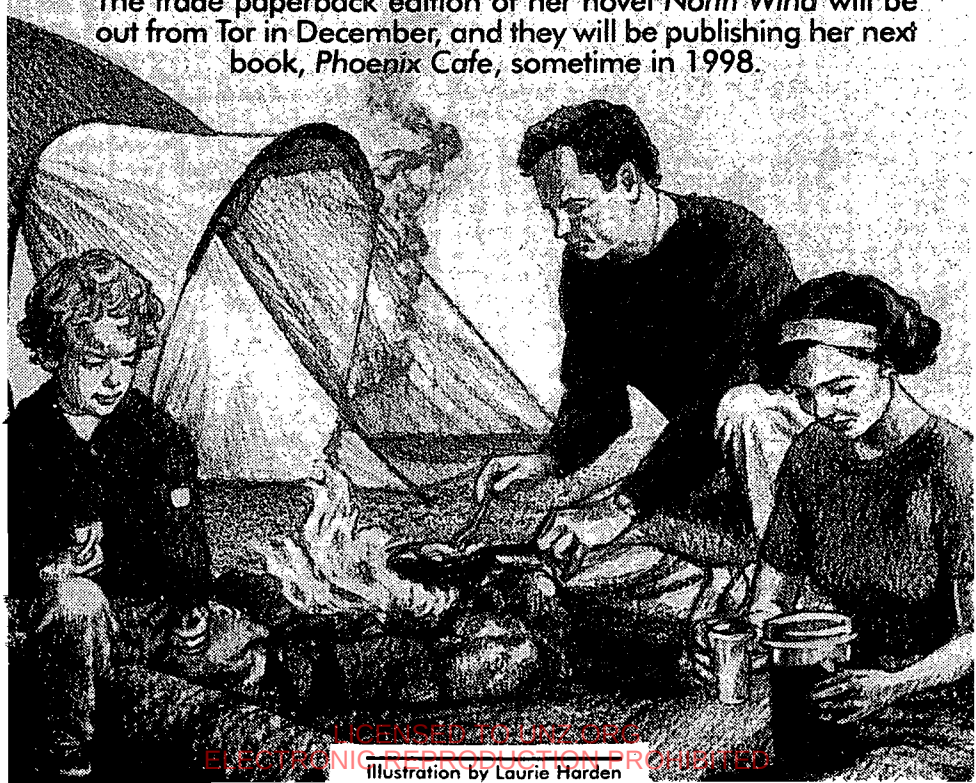

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Illustration by Laurie Harden

There comes a day when the road, the road that has served you so willingly and well, unfolding an endless absorbing game across the landscape, throwing up donjons on secret hills, meadows and forests, river beaches, sun-barred avenues that steadily rise and fall like the heartbeat of the summer, suddenly loses its charm. The baked verges sicken, the flowers have turned to straw, the air stinks of diesel fumes. The ribbon of grey flying ahead of you up hills and down dales is no longer magically empty, like a road in paradise. It is snarled with traffic: and even when you escape the traffic, everything seems spoiled and dead.

The cassette machine was playing one of Spence's classic compilations. The machine was itself an aged relic, its repertoire growing smaller as the tapes decayed, sagged and snapped and could not be replaced. They'd been singing along to this one merrily, from Avignon to Haut Vienne. Now Anna endured in silence while Spence stared dead ahead, beating time on the steering wheel and defiantly muttering scraps of lyric under his breath. They hadn't spoken to each other for hours. Jake lay in the back seat sweating, his bare and dirty feet thrust into a collapsed tower of camping gear. He was watching *The Witches* on his headband, his soft little face disfigured by the glossy bar across his eyes; his lips moving as he repeated under his breath the Roald Dahl dialogue they all knew by heart. Anna watched him in her mirror. Eyeless, her child looked as if he were dead. Or like an inadequately protected witness, a disguised criminal giving evidence.

"Got one!" barked Spence.

They were looking for a campsite.

It was late afternoon, the grey and brassy August sky had begun to fade. Spence had been following minor roads at random since that incident, in the middle of the day, on the crowded *route nationale,* when Anna had been driving. They had escaped death, but the debriefing had been inadequate—corticosterone levels rising; the terrible underlying ever-present *stress* of being on the road had come up fighting, shredding through their myths and legends of vagabond ease. Spence, in his wife's silence, swung the wheel around: circled the war memorial, cruised through a pretty village, passed the ancient church and the Norman keep, took the left turn by the *piscine.*

"Swimming!" piped up Jake, always easily pleased. He had emerged from TV heaven and was clutching the back of the driver's seat.

But the site was full of *gens de voyage,* a polite French term for the armies of homeless persons with huge battered mobile homes, swarms of equally battered and despairing kids, and packs of savage dogs, who were becoming such a feature of rural holidays in La Belle France. They usually kept to their own interstices of the road-world: the cindered truck-stop lay-bys and the desolate service areas where they hung their washing between eviscerated domestic hardware and burned-out auto wrecks.

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But if a bunch of them decided to infest a tourist campsite, it seemed that nothing could be done. Spence completed a circuit and stopped the car by the entrance, just upwind of a bonfire of old tires.

"Well, it seems a popular neighborhood. Shall we move in?"

Some hours ago, Anna had vowed that she was sick to death of this pointless, endless driving. She had threatened to get out of the car and *simply walk away* if they didn't stop at the next possible site. No matter what. She kept silent.

"They shouldn't be here," complained Jake. "They're not on holiday, are they?"

"No, kid, I guess they're not."

Spence waited, maliciously.

"Do whatever you want," she muttered.

Anna when angry turned extra-English, clipped and tart. In half-conscious, half-helpless retaliation, Spence reverted to the mid-west. He heard himself turning into that ersatz urban cowboy, someone Anna hated.

"Gee, I don't know, babe. Frankly, right now I don't care if I live or die."

The bruised kids, and their older brothers, were gathering. Spence waited.

"Drive on," she snapped, glowering in defeat.

So they drove on, to a drab little settlement about twenty klicks further along, where they found a municipal campsite laid out under the eaves of a wood. It had no swimming pool, but there was a playground with a trapeze. Jake, who believed that all his parents' sorrows on this extended holiday were occasioned by the lack of ponies, mini-golf, or a bar in some otherwise ideal setting, pointed this out with exaggerated joy. The huge rhino-jeep and trailer combo that they'd been following for the last few miles had arrived just ahead of them. Otherwise there was no one about. Anna and Spence set up the yurt, each signaling by courteously functional remarks that if acceptable terms could be agreed, peace might be restored. Each of them tried to get Jake to go away and play. But the child believed that his reluctance to help with the chores was another great cause of sorrow, so, of course, he stayed. Formal negotiations, which would inevitably have broken up in rancor, were therefore unable to commence. Peace returned in silence, led home by solitude; by the lingering heat and dusty haze of evening and the intermittent song of a blackbird.

While they were setting up, a cat appeared. It squeezed its way through the branches of the beech hedge at the back of their pitch, announcing itself before it could be seen in a loud, querulous oriental voice. It was a long-haired cat with a round face, small ears, blue eyes, and the coloring of a seal-point Siamese, except that its four dark brown feet seemed to have been dipped in cream. Spence thought he knew cats. He

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pronounced it a Balinese, a long-haired Siamese variant well known in the States.

"No," said Anna. "It's a Birman, a Burmese Temple Cat. Look, see the white tips to its paws. They're supposed to be descended from a breed of cats that were used as oracles in Burma, ages ago. Maybe it belongs to the people with the big trailer."

The cat was insistently friendly, but distracted. Alternately it made up to them, purring and gabbing on in its raucous Siamese voice, then broke off to sit in the middle of their pitch, fluffy dark tail curled around its white toes, staring from side to side as if looking for someone.

Spence, Jake, and Anna went for a walk. They inspected the sanitaires, and saw the middle-aged couple from the trailer heading toward the little town, probably in search of somewhere to eat. They studied the interactive guide to their locality that had been installed beside the toilet block. As usual, the parents stood at gaze while the child poked and touched, finding everything that was clickable and obediently reading all the text. There was a utility room with a washer-drier, sinks, and a card-in-the-slot multimedia screen, so you could watch a movie or video-phone *maman* while your socks were going round. Everything was new, bare, and cheap. Everything was waiting for the inexorable tide of tourism to arrive even here, even on this empty shore.

"Since everywhere interesting is either horribly crowded or destroyed already," said Anna, "obviously hordes of people will be driven to visit totally uninteresting places instead. One can see the logic."

"The *gens de voyage* will move in first," decided Spence.

Beyond the lower terrace of pitches, they found a small lake, the still surface of the water glazed peach-color by the sunset. Green wrought-iron benches stood beside a gravel path. Purple and yellow loosestrife grew in the long grass at the water's edge; dragonflies hovered. The hayfields beyond had been cut down to sonorous insect-laden turf; and in the distance a little round windmill stood up against the red glistening orb of the sun.

"Well, hey: this isn't so bad," Spence felt the shredded fabric coming together. They would be happy again.

"Lost in France," murmured Anna, smiling at last. "That's all we ask."

"What's that silver stuff in the water?" wondered Jake.

"It's just a reflection."

When they came closer they saw that the water margin was bobbing with dead fish.

Jake made cheerful retching noises. "What a stink!"

They retreated to the wood, where they discovered before long a deep dell among the trees that had been turned into the town dump. Part of it was smoldering. A little stream ran out from under the garbage, prattling merrily as it tripped down to pollute the lake. The dim but perva-

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sive stink of rot, smoke, and farm chemicals pursued them until the woodland path emerged at a crossroads on the edge of town.

"Typical Gallic economy," grumbled Spence, trying to see some humor in the situation. "Put the dump by the campsite. Why not? Those tourists are only passing through."

Anna said nothing. But her smile had vanished.

The town was a miniature ribbon development, apparently without a center. There was no sign of life; the two bars and the single restaurant were firmly shuttered. So they turned back, keeping to the road this time. Spence put together a meal of paté and bread and wine; *fatigue* salad from lunch in a plastic box. Anna took Jake to play on the trapeze. Unable to decide who had won the short straw on this occasion, Spence moved about the beech-hedge pitch, fixing things the way he liked them and making friends with the exotic cat, which was still hanging around. He named it the Balinese Dancer, from an old Chuck Prophet song that was going around in his head, about a guy who had a Balinese dancer tattooed across his chest. He couldn't remember what the point of the song was, probably something about having an amenable girlfriend who'd dance for you any time. But it gave him an excuse to restore his own name for the cat. Anna's inexhaustible fund of general knowledge annoyed him. Why couldn't she be ignorant, or even *pretend* to be ignorant, just once in a while? The cat was thin as a rail under the deceptive thickness of its coat, and though it obviously strove to keep up appearances, its fur was full of hidden burrs and tangles. He looked across the empty pitches to the playground and saw his wife hanging upside down on the trapeze, showing her white knickers: a lovely sight in the quiet evening. If only she could take things more easily, he thought. A few dead fish, what the hell. It doesn't have to ruin your life. The middle-aged couple from the trailer were standing by their beefy hunk of four-wheel drive, heads together, talking hard. They looked as if they were saying things that they wouldn't want anyone to overhear. Probably having a stinking fight, thought Spence with satisfaction. He meditated going over to improve their camping-trip hell by asking them why they didn't take better care of their cat. But refrained.

The Balinese Dancer was still with him when Anna and Jake came back. It had reverted to its sentry duty, sitting alert and upright in the middle of the pitch.

"He's a lost cat," said Jake. "Can we keep him?"

"I thought we decided he belonged to those guys over there," Spence pointed out.

"No he doesn't."

"It doesn't," Anna confirmed. "Jake asked them. They have no cat."

"I think he was left behind. Did you notice, our pitch is the only one on this terrace that people have used recently? There was a caravan and a

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tent here. About a week ago by the look of the marks on the grass. They went and left without him. That's what I think."

Over his head, young Sherlock's parents exchanged an agreement to block any further moves toward an adoption.

"No, I bet he comes from that place up on the road." Spence pointed to a red-roofed ranchero that they could see over their hedge, the last house of the town. "He's probably discovered that tourists are a soft touch, and comes here on the scrounge."

"Can I go and ask them?"

"No!" snapped Anna and Spence together. Jake shrugged, and gave the cat some paté. It didn't have the manners of a beggar. It ate a little, as if for politeness' sake, and resumed its eager watchfulness.

The child was put to bed and finally slept, having failed to persuade the cat to join him inside the yurt. The parents stayed outside. The air was so still that Anna brought out candles, to save the big lamp. They lay wrapped in rugs, reading and talking softly, and made a list for the next hypermarche: where, it was to be hoped, there'd be cooking gas cylinders in stock again at last. And batteries for Jake's headband TV, the single most necessary luxury in their lives. The cat came to visit them, peering sweetly into their faces and inviting them to play. It showed no sign of returning to the red-roofed ranch.

"You know," said Anna, "Jake could be right. It's weird for a fancy cat like that to be wandering around on the loose, like any old moggie. It's a tom, did you notice?"

"I thought toms were supposed to roam."

"Cat breeders keep their studs banged-up. They spend their lives in solitary, except when they're on the job. An inferior male kitten sold for a pet gets castrated. Let's take a closer look."

The Burmese Temple Cat was a young entire male, very thin but otherwise in good health. He had once worn a collar. He now had no identifying marks. He suffered their examination with good-tempered patience, stayed to play for a little longer, and then resumed his vigil: staring hopefully into the night.

"He's waiting for someone," said Anna, finishing her wine. "Poor little bugger. He must have gone off exploring, and they left without him. Pity he's not tattooed."

"Libertarians are everywhere," Spence reminded her. "That's probably why he still has his balls, too. No castration for me, no castration for my cat. I can see that."

"What can we do? I suppose we could leave a message at the gendarmerie, if there is one. Anyone who lost a cat like that's bound to have reported him missing."

"We can tell the *gardienne* in the morning, when she comes to collect the rent."

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* * *

Next day started slowly. After lunch, Spence and Jake walked into town to look for the post office. Spence needed to dispatch the proofs of *The Coast of Coramandel,* latest of the adventures of a renowned female pirate captain: who, with her dashing young mate Jake and the rest of the desperate crew, had been keeping Patrick Spencer Meade in gainful employment for some years. The postmistress greeted them with disdain and pity, as if tourists were an endangered species too far gone to be worth your sympathy. She examined his laptop, and refused to admit that her establishment possessed a phone jack that he could plug into. She told him he could use the telephone in a normal manner, but she was afraid that connections with England and the United States were impossible at present. She told him to go to Paris. Or Lyons.

Or just get the hell out of here.

Spence's understanding of French was adequate but not subtle. He was always missing the point on small details. He'd learned to smile and nod and pass for normal; it had never failed so far. He accepted the woman's hostility without complaint, and wondered what had caused the latest telecoms melt. Urban terrorism? Surprise right-wing coup brings down the Paris government? Whole population of the UK succumbs to food poisoning? It was almost enough to send him in search of an English language newspaper, or drive him to reconnect the wb receiver in the car. But not quite. They were on holiday. Lost in France, and planning to stay lost for as long as the market would bear.

He paid for a mass of stamps and handed over the package containing the printed copy, which his publishers routinely required to back up anything sent down the wire. Andrea would be happy. His editor was an elderly young lady with a deep contempt for all things cyberspatial. She'd have loved it if Spence turned in his books written in longhand on reams of parchment. He collected Jake from the philately counter, and they left.

They wandered on up the single street, which was hardly less deathly still than it had been the evening before. They bought bread, and for want of anything else to explore, went into the ugly yellow church that stood by the war memorial in a walled yard paved with gravestones.

The interior had a crumbling nineteenth-century mariolatory decor: sky-blue heavens, madonna lilies, silver ribbons. The structure was much older. Spence traced a course of ancient stone, revealed where a long chunk of painted plaster had fallen away. It was cool and damp to the touch, and still marked by the blows of its maker who had been dead for a thousand years. He sat on the front bench in the lady chapel, holding his laptop on his knees. Jake went to investigate a dusty Easter Garden in the children's corner: Christ's sepulcher done in papier-mâché and florist's moss; a matchwood cross draped in a swag of white.

Spence was glad of a chance to sit and stare; a chance to think about

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the situation. When Anna was angry, she always brought up his Americanness. His thick-skinned hardiness, his refusal to *suffer*. Could he undo that crime, become one of those who didn't escape? He imagined himself burned in his bed by the Cossacks in some Eastern European village, starving in the west of Ireland. Taken up from the nine-inch board in that stinking hold, extricated from his neighbors, his chains struck off. Over the side, a sack of spoiled meat. He saw himself fall into grace, loose limbs flapping: down into the green water, silver bubbles rising as the body slowly tumbles, into the deep, the very deep. . . . It was too late. Can't turn back the hand of time. Spence lived, and would have to keep this defiant spirit, wherever it came from, that would not be mortified.

At least he could claim to be a permanent exile. Spence could never go home, not for more than a week or so at a time, not so long as his wife and his mother both lived. The whole United States wasn't big enough to contain the iron-hard territoriality of those two females. This didn't bother him. It only surprised him occasionally, when he realized how solidly his marriage had confirmed the choice he'd made for himself long before. He preferred America this way—preserved from one brief visit to the next in his voice, in his tastes, in his childhood memories. Yet displacement breeds displacement. They had traveled a great deal, in Europe and beyond, always going farther and staying away longer than other people. They'd have taken longer and wilder trips still, except for Anna's commitment to her work.

Now Anna's job was gone. There was nothing to go back for. No drag, no tie, no limit. They were no longer locked into that damned university laboratory academic year, miserable crowded August holidays. She's mine now, he thought. She's all mine. Instantly he was punished by a vision of Anna's hands. Anna moving round a clothes shop like a blind woman, assessing the fabric as if she was reading Braille: smoothing a shoulder seam, judging the cut and the fall of the cloth with those animate fingers, those living creatures imbued with genius. Anna removing and cleaning her contact lenses, nights in the past, so smashed she could hardly *breathe;* the deft economy of her gestures serenely undisturbed. Those hands rendered useless, unable to practice the art that he only knew in its faint, mundane echoes? Oh no. He thought of Marie Curie, the exacting drudgery of women scientists; it comes naturally to them. Delicacy and endurance, backed by a brain the size of Jupiter. She can't have lost all that . . . Recent memory, from those last extraordinary weeks in England, cast up a red-faced drunken old man at a publishers' party, shouting *"your wife has destroyed the fabric of society!"* One of the more bizarre incidents in his career as a scientist's spouse.

He could not take her disaster seriously, and therefore he was free to indulge his daydreams. Of course she'd get another job, but they didn't have to go home yet. They could stay away for the whole of September,

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mellow empty September in the French countryside. Could go south again, over to Italy, move into hotels if the weather gives out (but they all three loved to live outdoors).We can afford it, he thought, glowing a little. Easy. I may be a mere kiddies' entertainer, but I can put food on the family table. She practically had a breakdown, she's still fragile and depressed, not herself: she needs space.

But what would it be like to live with Anna, without her career? What about sex? There'd be no more foreign conferences, no more jokes about oversexed sex biologists. No more of those sparky professional friendships that had to make him suspicious, damn it, though he'd persistently denied it. He could be sure of her now . . . The idea made him uneasy. What would happen to desire, if the little goad of fear was removed? Spence had been trained by his wife to believe that animal behavior invariably has an end in view, however twisted, however bent out of shape. What if sex with his best beloved (since they weren't making babies, and it was no longer the forever inadequate confirmation that she belonged to him) began to seem unnecessary, a pointless exercise, a meaningless pleasure? An awful pang, as if the loss was real and already irrevocable, broke him out of his reverie.

He stood up. "Let's go, kid."

Jake was reluctant to leave the empty tomb, which was surrounded by a phalanx of homemade fake sunflowers, each with a photograph of a child's face in the center. He admired the whole ensemble greatly: because, Spence guessed, he could imagine doing something like that himself. The greatest art in Europe had left Jake unimpressed, since he felt he had no stake in the enterprise.

"Can we take a picture of it ?"

"'Fraid not. We didn't bring the camera."

"Can we come back with the camera, later?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe means no," muttered Jake under his breath. "Why not call a spade a spade?"

They went in search of the *gardienne*. She hadn't turned up to claim their rent in the morning. The manager of a municipal campsite usually operated out of the town hall, but this one had a house near that crossroads where the path through the wood came out. They were permitted to enter a stiff, funereal parlor. The registration form was filled in, with immense labor, by the skinny old lady and a very fat man, either her husband or her son, who was squelched immovable into a wheelback armchair at the parlor table. Jake made friends with a little dog. Spence stared at a huge ornate clock that seemed on the point of plunging to its death from the top shelf of an oak dresser laden with ugly china.

She didn't know anything about the Balinese Dancer. There was no such cat in the village. No such cat had been reported missing by any

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campers. She could not recall when pitch 16 had last been used, and rejected the suggestion that she might consult her records. She supposed he might report this lost cat to the police, but she saw no reason why he should give himself the trouble. The police here knew their business; they would not be interested in his story.

Spence began to get very strange vibes.

He changed the subject. They chatted a little about the political situation, always a safe topic for non-specific head-shaking and sighing. Spence paid for two nights' camping and recovered his passport. "Let's go back through the woods," he said, when they were outside.

"We haven't finished exploring."

"Your Mom's been alone long enough."

Sitting on the floor in the sanitaires, Anna scrubbed her legs with an emery paper glove. She blew away a dust of powdered hair from the page of Ramone Holyrod's essays, keeping the book open on the floor by holding the pages down with the balls of her feet.

. . . like the civil rights movement, feminism has achieved certain goals at a wholly destructive price. It has created an aspirational female middle class whose interests are at odds with the interests of the female masses, and with the original aim of the movement. Successful women trade on their femininity. They have no desire to see difference between the sexes eroded, they foster and elaborate that same difference which condemns millions of other women . . .

Anna was catching up. She'd once known Ramone personally, but she'd never had time to read books like this. She worked moisturizing lotion into the newly smooth bare skin and removed a vagrant drop, the color of melted chocolate ice cream, from the text. Feminist rage, she decided, had not changed much since she last looked. She turned *Prefutural Tension* face down and went to the mirror above the sinks, took her kohl pencil from the family washbag, stretched the skin of her left upper eyelid taut by applying a firm fingertip to the outer corner, and drew a fine solid line along the base of her lashes. Mirrors had begun to be haunted by the ghost of Anna's middle age, by whispers from magazines saying *don't drink and go to bed early*. But what good did it do if you couldn't sleep? There was always something to prevent her. Last night, the faint smell of that dump . . .

The campsite was completely quiet. The couple with the big trailer had left at dawn. If they were intent on skipping the rent, they needn't have bothered. The *gardienne* here obviously wasn't the conscientious kind. Anna turned a soft brush in a palette of eyeshadow, a shade of yellow that was nearly gold, and dusted it across the whole area of her eyes: to lift and brighten the natural tone of her tanned skin, and correct the slightly too deep sockets.

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Ramone had a nerve. A professional feminist, accusing other people of "trading on their feminine identity." Maquillage, she thought (carefully stroking the mascara wand upward, under her lower lashes) is not a female trait, if you want to talk ethnic origins. I can give you chapter and verse on that, Ramone my dear. Codon by codon. It's a male sexual gesture. As you well know. The public world is male, and to deal with it we all have to adopt male behavior. You and me both, Ramone, we have to display: strut our stuff or perish, publish or be damned. It's not your fault or mine, sister. It's simply a question of whose head is on the coin. You want to work for the company, you wear the uniform. Where do you get off, claiming that you can speak from some *female* parade ground, where competition and challenge are unknown? Balls to that.

She gazed at the face of Caesar in the mirror. Wide brow, pointed chin, black eyes, golden brown skin: Anna Senoz. *Yes, I'm married. No, I didn't change my name. Why didn't you change your name? Because I didn't want to. Next question* . . . She thought of her ancestors, Spanish Jews, pragmatic converts to Christianity. Discreet, tolerated aliens. I should have strutted my two-fisted stuff more and used less eyeliner. Ramone's right. Power dressing seems like the solution, if you're moving in a male world. But sexual display in a female animal means *I submit*. It has to be that way, it's a safety guarantee of non-aggression that the male demands. So display is a male behavior, but if you're a female, sexual showing-off rebounds on you, it doesn't work right.

She had collected suitors, not vassals or allies. She had been envied, desired, but not feared. She had charmed her way along, never issuing challenges. Playing the pretty woman had made life so much easier, until it came to the crunch. It's Spence's fault, she thought. Before Spence I liked sex and I hoped I was attractive enough to get my share, but I had no more paranoia about my personal appearance than if I was Albert Einstein. He told me I was beautiful. He got me hooked on femininity, and it's done me no good at all.

Anna had wanted to be a plant geneticist. She'd done her first research on jumping genes, transposons, in maize. She'd been sidelined early into Human Assisted Reproduction, because that was where the funding was. That was when she'd written her first paper on Transferred Y, suggesting that certain cases of chromosomal intrasexuality with unimpaired fertility (studied in the hope of finding a gene therapy fix for the stubbornly infertile), were the effect of a transposon. No one had been much interested. But Anna had felt that she was on the track of something fascinating. Transferred Y kept calling her back, tugging at her mind, like the child with whom you can never spend enough time when you're a working parent. She had managed to make the time at last, managed to make this brainchild part of her job. And then, when she had the results, she'd written a paper—as restrained, modest and professional as the first

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one—suggesting that a benign donation of genetic material between the sexes was becoming established in the human genome.

The erosion of difference between the sexes, though it might not interest Ramone's *aspirational female middle class*, had been a hot topic in Anna's world for several years—at the molecular level. Anna had known that her team's paper (along with the simultaneous presentation on superU-net) would be challenged, questioned; angrily dismissed in some quarters. She was not a professional feminist, but she wasn't a political moron. She had known there would be trouble. She knew that they were making an extraordinary proposition. She'd even joked that the news might hit the tabloids. It had not occurred to her that she might lose her job.

She remembered the morning that she'd found out. Her boss had called her to a private meeting, "a chat" he'd called it, which they all knew was an ominous term, a warning. It was May time, but the sky was grey. Outside his floor-length windows, wet tassels of sycamore flower littered the Biology car-park. The fresh leaves on the copse of trees that obscured the Material Sciences Tower were shining in the rain. Anna had demonstrated that the future belongs neither to women nor to men, but to some new creature, now inexorably on its way. She had spoken this as fact, and waited to see how other scientists would treat her results. Suddenly, she found herself fighting for her professional life.

She could not understand what had gone wrong. *But it isn't a scare story*, she heard herself protesting. *What I'm saying is that this isn't like global warming or holes in the ozone layer. It's not a punishment, it's not an awful threat. Something is happening, that's all. It's just evolution.* She was floundering. She had prepared the wrong script. She had been ready to win him over, to show him how this unexpected notoriety could work for the department. But he was furious, personally enraged. He was saying that she'd set out deliberately to raise a media storm, with her wild, offensive overstatements. *What does it matter?* she begged. *It's not as if anything's going to change overnight. This is not something anyone will consciously experience. This will be like . . . coming down from the trees.*

She had found herself staring over his shoulder at the green world outside, trying to hear the birds in the little wood. There would be blackbirds, robins, perhaps a wren. The chorus was sadly depleted. Did he say *your views are not welcome in this department?* I don't have any "views," protested Anna . . . Did he say *will not be renewing your contract?* She was thinking of the songthrush and the cuckoo, those sweet and homely voices forever stilled. She had started to cry. He'd given her a paper tissue from a box he kept in his desk drawer, and calmed down, satisfied. "*I'm sorry,*" he'd said. "*I'm sorry, but . . .*"

The door of the sanitaires creaked and in walked the lost cat. He

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glanced around, and came to question Anna with a diffident *mrrrow?* Anna wiped her eyes. Of course, I reacted as stupidly as possible. I was in shock and didn't know it. But she remembered rage at the man's pompous trivialities, rage that came out as tears, and knew that she'd been betrayed by her sex. Loss and shame had turned her into a stereotypical woman. It was still happening now. That's why she was here, grooming herself for comfort, doing the domestic, while Spence went out in public to deal with the world. "I'll be taking to the veil next," she told the cat gloomily. And, indeed, there'd been times in the last few months when she'd have been glad to hide her head, to retire under a big thick blanket and never come out.

"What do I know about animal behavior, anyway?" she said aloud. "I'm a molecular biologist. Enough to impress Spence: that doesn't take much."

The yurt was too hot and the campsite outdoors was too empty. She took Ramone's essays into the utility room, where their washing was still going round, and sat on the cool tiled floor. The Burmese Temple Cat came with her, but couldn't settle. He paced and cried. "Poor thing," Anna sympathized. "Poor thing. They let you down, didn't they? They abandoned you, and you haven't an idea what you did wrong. Never mind, maybe we'll find them."

But his grief disturbed her. It was too close to her own.

Spence and Jake walked through the woods. Spence was wondering what the hell *is* the approved *Academie Française* term for "modem," anyhow? For God's sake, even the Vatican accepts "modem." If it's good enough for the Pope . . . He'd have to ask Anna. But he wasn't sure there had been any misunderstanding at the post office. It was possible the postmistress really had been telling him, *don't hang around.* He was still getting very strange vibes from that conversation with the *gardienne.* Maybe something final and terrible had happened. France and England had declared war on each other, and tourists were liable to be rounded up as undesirable aliens. He wasn't sure that war between two states of the European Union was technically possible. It would have to be a civil war. No problem with that: a very popular global sport. In fact, he wouldn't be a bit surprised. The only problem would be for the French and English governments to handle anything so *organized.* Have to get the telecoms to work again first . . .

They had reached the dump. That smell surrounded them. Crowds of flies hummed and muttered, and the surface of the wide, garbage-filled hollow drew Spence's eyes. He was looking for something that he had seen last night in the twilight, seen and not quite registered. The flies buzzed. He had stopped walking. Jake was looking up at him, wrinkling his nose: puzzled that an adult could be so indifferent to the ripe stink.

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He handed over his laptop. Jake was already carrying the bread.

"Go on back. I'll be along in a minute. I want to check something."

"But I want to see what you find!"

"I'm not going to find anything. I'm just going to take a leak."

"I want a wee too."

"No, you don't. Get going. Tell Anna I won't be long."

Spence waited until he was sure the child wasn't going to turn back. Then he went to investigate the buried wreckage. He found the remains of a caravan. It had been burned out, quite recently, having been stripped first (as far as he could tell) of identification. He crouched on the flank of a big plastic drum that had once contained fertilizer, and pondered. Someone had rolled a wrecked mobile home into this landfill, having removed the plates, and covered it over. What did that prove? It didn't prove anything except that he was letting himself get spooked. "I'm over tired," he said aloud, scowling. "Been on the road too long." But the garbage had shifted when he was clambering over it, and the dump refused to let him cling to his innocence. He climbed down from his perch, and discovered that the suggestive-looking bunch of twigs that he'd spotted really *was* a human hand.

It had been a woman's hand, not young. It was filthy, and the rats had been at it, but he could still see lumpy knuckles and the paler indentations left by her rings. He found a stick and pried at the surrounding layers of junk until he had uncovered her face. There wasn't much left of that. He squatted, looking down: remembering Father Moynihan in his coffin, like something carved out of yellow wax. His own father too, but he had no memory of that dead body. He'd been too young: not allowed to look.

"What did you do?" he whispered. "Too rich, too funny-looking? Wrong kind of car? Did you support the wrong football team? Was it because you didn't castrate your cat?"

The flies buzzed. Around him, beyond the thin woodland, stretched the great emptiness: all the parched, desolate, rural heartlands of Europe, where life was strained and desperate as in any foundering city. All the lost little towns starved of hope, where people turned into monsters without anything showing on the outside.

Anna groped for potatoes in the sack in the back of the car, brought out another that was too green to eat, and chucked it aside. He knows nothing. He hasn't a clue about the backbiting, the betrayals, all the internal politics. Spence admires my work in a romantic way, but in the end it's just something that keeps me away from home. Maybe he's my wife. She felt the descant of male to female, female to male, the slipping and sliding between identities that had been natural and accepted surely by most people, for years and years. It was Anna's boss who was crazy. How could

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anyone be *angry* about an arrangement of chemicals? The sack was nearly empty. *What's happening to my French beans? The lettuces will be shot.* She was pining for her garden. It was so difficult to get hold of good fresh vegetables on the road. The prepackaged stuff in the hypermarkets was an insult, but the farmers' markets weren't much better. Not when you were a stranger and didn't know your way around. We'll go home. I'll pull myself together, start fighting my corner the way I should have done at the start. We'll have to go back soon, she assured herself, knowing Spence's silent resistance. Jake has to go to school.

She saw him come out of the wood. He went straight to the sanitaires, vanished for several minutes, and slowly came toward her. He sat on the rim of the hatchback. There were drops of water in his hair, and his hands were wet.

"Where's Jake?"

"In the playground. What's the matter? You look sick."

"I found a body in the dump."

They both stared at the distant figure of the child. He was climbing on the knotted rope, singing a song from a French TV commercial. Anna felt claws of ice dig into her spine, as if something expected but ridiculously forgotten had jumped out *Boo!* from behind a door.

"You mean a human body?"

"Yes. I could only find one, but I think there must be two." He imagined a couple, a middle-aged early-retirement couple, modestly well-heeled, children, if any, long ago departed. Spending the summer *en plein air*, the way the French love to do: with their cat. "I covered it over again. I was afraid to root around, but there's a caravan too. I'm not joking. It's true."

"You'd better show me."

Spence gasped, and shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"*Because we can't let Jake see that, and we can't leave him here alone.*"

Anna nodded. She went to the front of the car and started searching under the seats and in the door pockets.

"What are you looking for?"

"The camera." She brought it out. "I'll take pictures. Will it be easy for me to find?"

It was about the same time of day as it had been when they arrived. Shortly, Jake noticed that his father had returned and came running over. The Balinese Dancer ran along beside him.

"Where's Mummy?"

"She's gone to check something."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Her too?" Spence had forgotten he'd used the exact same words at the dump, when he sent the kid on alone. "Is it something about my cat?"

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Balinese Dancer looked up. Spence had a terrible, irrational feeling that the cat knew. He knew what Spence had seen, and that there was no hope anymore.

"Don't start getting ideas."

For most of the time that Anna was away, it didn't cross his mind that she was in danger. Then it did, and he spent a very unhappy quarter of an hour, playing Scrabble with Jake while racking his brains to recover every word he'd spoken in that town, especially in his rash interview with the *gardienne*: praying to God he'd said nothing to rouse anyone's suspicions. They washed the potatoes. Spence cut them up, chopped an onion and some garlic, opened a can of tomatoes and one of chickpeas. He put olives in a bowl, and spread the picnic table-cloth. He didn't light the stove until everything was ready, because they were running out of gas. At last, Anna came out of that grisly wood.

"Shall I start cooking?"

"I'm going to have a shower," she said.

While Anna put Jake to bed, Spence washed the dishes, and stored away the almost untouched potato stew. He checked the car over and gathered a few stray belongings from the shriveled grass. Their camp was compact. One modest green hatchback, UK plates, anonymous middle-class brand. One mushroom-shaped tent dwelling. No bicycles, no surfboards. No TV aerial dish, no patio furniture. The sky was overcast, but blurred with moon silver in the east. How often had they camped like this beside some still and secret little town? That place in Italy on the hilltop, most certainly a haunt of vampires. . . .

The cat wove at his ankles and followed him indoors. Inside, the yurt was a single conical space that could be divided by cunning foldaway partitions. It was furnished with nomad simplicity and comfort: their bed, rugs, books; small useful items of gear. There was no mere decoration, no more than if they'd been traveling on the steppes with Ghengis Khan. Spence set down the wine bottle, two glasses, and the rest of the bread. Anna stepped out of Jake's section and sealed it behind her. They sat on the floor with the lamp turned low, and looked at the pictures she had taken. She'd uncovered the body further and taken several shots of the head and torso, the hands and wrists; and then the whole ensemble, the wrecked caravan. She had seen what she thought was the second corpse, burned to a black crisp inside the caravan, but hadn't been able to get a clear picture of that.

"You think it was locals?" she asked.

Spence told her about the postmistress, and the *gardienne*. A one-street town wrapped in guilty silence: "I'm sure they know about it. Maybe someone had an accident. Someone ran into them and wrecked them, found they were dead and got scared . . ."

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"And took the woman's rings. And gouged out her eyes. And tied her up."

Anna touched the preview screen, advancing from shot to shot until she found the woman's face. She moved it into close-up, but their camera was not equal to this kind of work. The image blurred into a drab Halloween mask: crumpled plastic; black eye holes.

"That other couple must have picked up on something," she guessed. "That's why they left so quickly." She shivered.

"Well," said Spence, "It's been all around us. We finally managed to run right into it. The town that eats tourists. Of course, in the good old U.S. of A., we're cool about this kind of thing. Vampire towns, ghoul towns, whole counties run by serial-killer aliens. We take it for granted. Poor Balinese Dancer, I'm afraid your people definitely aren't coming back."

"You can't call him that," she said. "He's not a Balinese. He's a Birman. Don't you believe me? Hook up the CD-ROM, and we can look him up in Jake's encyclopedia—"

"I believe you. But why can't I *call* him Balinese?"

"Because you're doing it to annoy me. And . . . we don't need that."

In the direct look she gave him, the hostilities that had rumbled under their un-negotiated peace finally came to an end. Spence sighed. "Oh, okay. I won't."

"Is there any wine left?" asked Anna. He handed her the bottle. She poured some into their glasses, broke a chunk of bread, and ate it.

"So what are we going to do? Report our finds to the gendarmes?"

"Don't be stupid," said Anna.

"Not here, definitely not. But in Lyons, maybe."

"They wouldn't do anything. You know they wouldn't. City flics don't come looking for trouble in the *deserte rural.*"

The rural desert. That was what the French called their prairie band. Mile upon mile of wheat and maize and sunflowers: all of it on death row as an economic activity, having lived just long enough to kill off most of the previous ecology. And destroy a lot of human lives.

"Okay, then we could stick around here and do a little investigation for ourselves."

The cat was sitting diffidently outside the circle of lamplight, his eyes moving from face to face. Spence's heart went out to him. "Try to find out who the cat's folks were, where they came from, why this happened to them. Uncover some fetid tale or other, maybe get one or other of ourselves tortured and killed as well; or maybe Jake—"

Anna grimaced wryly. "No thanks."

"Or we could do what they never do in the movies. Stop the thrilling plot before it starts. Walk on by."

She switched off the camera and stayed for a long time staring at the

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grey floor of the yurt, elbows on her knees and chin in her hands. She had turned the dead face from side to side, without flinching from her task. *This is the truth. It must be examined, described.* But no one wanted to be told. There would be no assessment, no judgment.

"Spence, I have a terrible feeling. It's about my paper. I started thinking this when I was looking at her, when I was recording her death. Suppose . . . suppose the tabloids *aren't* loopy and my boss *isn't* deranged? Suppose while we've been away, while we've been cut off from all the news, the world has finally been going over the edge, because of what I said?"

"The whole place was going mad before you published, kid. The end of the world as we know it started a long time ago."

"Yes, Spence dear. Exactly. That's what my paper says."

Spence took a slug from the wine bottle, neglecting the glass that was poured for him. That sweet tone of invincible intellectual superiority, *when it was friendly,* always made him go weak at the knees.

"Would you like to have sex?" he hazarded, across the tremulous lamplight.

"Like plague victims," said Anna huskily. "Rutting in the streets, death all around."

"Okay, but *would* you?"

Flash of white knickers in the twilight. Nothing's sure. Every time could be the last.

"Yes."

When they were both done, both satisfied, Spence managed to fall asleep. He dreamed that he was clinging to the side of a runaway train that was racing downhill in the dark. Anna was in his arms and Jake held between them. He knew that he had to leap from this train before it smashed, holding onto them both. But he was too terrified to let go.

They had pitched the yurt at dusk, in a service area campsite. The great road thundered by the scrubby expanse of red grit, where tents and trucks and vans stood cheek-by-jowl without a tree or a blade of grass in sight. The clientele was mixed. There were *gens de voyage,* with their pitches staked out in the traditional, aggressive washing lines; colorful New Age travelers trying to look like visitors from the stone age; respectable itinerant workers in their tidy camper vans; truck drivers asleep in their cabs. Among them were the tourists, people like Anna and Jake and Spence, turned back from the channel ports by the fishing-dispute blockade, who had wisely moved inland from the beaches.

Spence was removing the cassette player from the car, so he could refit the wide bandwidth receiver that would give them access to the great big world again. The dusk was no problem, as this campsite was lit by enormous gangling floodlights that seemed to have been bought second-

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hand from a football stadium. But the player had turned obstinate. He was lying on his back, legs in the yard and face squished in the leg space under the dashboard, struggling with some tiny recalcitrant screws. Chuck the cat, ever fascinated and helpful when there was work going on, was sitting on the passenger seat and patting the screws that *had* come out down into the crack at the back of the cushion.

Something thumped near Spence's head. He wriggled out. Anna had returned from her mission with a lumpy burlap sack.

"What's in there?"

"Potatoes, courgettes-I-mean-zucchini, and string beans. But the beans are pure string."

"Still, that's pretty good. What did you have to do?"

The channel tunnel had been down, so to speak, for most of the summer. This new interruption of the ferry services had compounded everyone's problems. Hypermarches along the coast had turned traitor, closing their doors to all but the local population. The more enterprising of the stranded travelers were resorting to barter.

"Nothing too difficult. First aid. Dietary advice to an incipient diabetic, she needs an implant but diet will help; and I'm attending to a septic cut."

"This is weird. You can't practice medicine!"

Anna rubbed her bare brown shoulder, where the sack had galled her, and shrugged. "Let me see. *First, do no harm.* Well, I have no antibiotics, no antimalarials, no carrier viruses or steroids, so that's all right. I have aspirin, I know how to reduce a fracture, and I wash my hands a lot. What more can you ask?"

"My God." He groped for the screwdriver, which had escaped into camping-trip morass under the seat. "Could you give me some assistance for a moment? Since you're here?"

"No, because I don't want you to do that."

"But I'm doing it anyway."

"Good luck to you," she said, without rancor. "It's mostly pure noise, in my opinion."

At bedtime, Anna listened while Jake read to her the story of the Burmese Temple cat called Sinh, who was an oracle. He lived with a priest called Mun-Ha, and they were both very miserable because Burma was being invaded. When Mun-Ha died, the goddess Tsun-Kyankse transfused Mun-Ha's spirit into Sinh. His eyes turned blue as sapphires, his nose and feet and tail turned dark as the sacred earth, and the rest of him turned gold, except for the tips of his paws—which were touching Mun-Ha's white hair at the moment the holy priest died. Then Sinh transfused his power into the rest of the priests, and they went and saved Burma.

"Do you know what an oracle is?"

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"Yeah," he answered drowsily. "It's a little boat."

Coracle, oracle: a messenger from the gods and a little boat on a great big shoreless sea. Anna watched as the child fell deeper into sleep.

Spence finished his task and repaired to the bar. He ordered two *pression* and took them to a table by the doors that he already thought of as his and Anna's table, because that was where they sat when they came in for a drink before setting up. The large, dimly lit room was crowded, but not oppressively stuffed. Foosball in the games room, pizzas and frites and sandwiches readily available; absolutely no pretensions. Yes, he thought. It's our kind of joint. The clatter of conversation, mostly French, soon blended into a soothing, encompassing ocean roar: laughter or the clink of glassware springing up like spray.

We could live here, he decided. In this twilight. He imagined the blockade stretching into months and years; imagined that the actual no-kidding disintegration had begun—which of course was nonsense. Anna, armed with their home-medicine manual, could become a quack doctor. Maybe Spence could sell information? He dallied with the idea of describing Anna as a *wisewoman*, but rejected it. Call a spade a spade. This is not the dawning of some magical, nurturing female future. It's the same road we've been traveling for so long, going down into the dark. . . .

Chuck had followed him from the car and was sitting on the chair next to Spence, taking it all in with his usual assured and gentle gaze. The young woman from the bar came by with a tray of glasses. Spence had a moment's anxiety. Chuck was respectably vaccinated and tattooed now. They'd managed to get this done in the same town where they'd dispatched (this was the compromise they'd reached) an anonymous tip-off, and prints of Anna's photographs, to the police in the regional capital. But maybe he wasn't welcome in the bar.

But she'd only stopped to admire. "What do you call him?" she asked.

"Chuck Prophet."

The girl laughed, effortlessly balancing her tray on one thin muscular arm, and bending to rub the Birman's delectably soft, ruffled throat. "That's an unusual name for a cat."

"He's an unusual cat," explained Spence proudly.

She moved on. Chuck had accepted her caress the way he took any kind of attention: sweetly, but a little distracted, a little disappointed at the touch of a hand that was not the hand he waited for. The moment she was gone, he resumed his eager study of the crowd, his silver-blue eyes searching hopefully: ears alert for a voice and a step that he would never hear again. Still keeping the faith, still confident that normal service would be restored. ●

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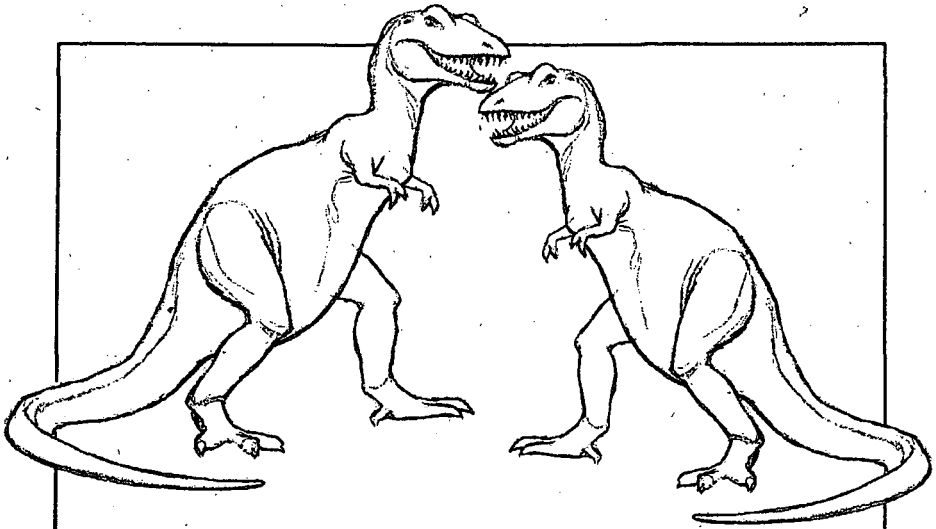

REX AND REGINA

The audience of one,
a bigger-than-life,
unwholesomely green
Confederate infantryman,
seems unmoved by the spectacle
of uncouth monsters
trampling the untended
courthouse lawn.
Tyrannosaurus rex and *regina*
dance an artless dance
under the old elm trees
of the county seat,
bobbing their big heads
and dipping their tails
in time with some lingering
Cretaceous melody to which
there are no words.
But the magic's still there.

—Steven Utley

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Leslie What

Leslie What's fiction sales include stories to *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and several small literary publications. She recently finished a novel based on her short story, "The Goddess Is Alive, and, Well, Living in New York" (*Asimov's*, May 1996), and she has begun working on another book. In her disturbing new tale, a family is touched by a sinister force that is . . .

Illustration by John Stevens

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SMELLING OF EARTH, DREAMING OF SKY

Sunday at church:
In his sermon, the minister preaches that the first man was made from earth. "Adamah," he begins, "common clay, begat Adam, common man." Adam of Earth, who thought he knew better than God and was forced to leave Paradise.

"We all—every one of us—came from that very clay," says the minister. "With this humble beginning, the Bible teaches that not one of us is better than the rest."

I groan, disagreeing. The minister must be referring to the commoners. The air in the chapel is stale and full of dust. I choke on the dry stink and imagine the clean smell of sky and the scent of freedom. I would leave this place if only my feet didn't feel heavy, as if rooted to the floor. Perhaps in my short time on this earth I've become more like substantive *Man*, dirty and thick, than the stuff angels are made of.

I wait for church to end. I shall dutifully follow out my husband, Jacob, who sits fidgeting, his brown corduroy pants nearly indistinguishable from the worn pews. He's afraid to meet my glance, and, instead, his eyes dart between the minister and the children. He's given up on me, but still prays that the children can be saved.

That night I dream of Heaven, a beautiful light where angels live in an endless sky smelling of the moments before rain. I remember, again, that I am not of this place, that I am a fallen angel who has fought with God, and lost her place among the divine. As my punishment, I was sent to live in exile, instructed to perform the proverbial good deeds in exchange for redemption.

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I awaken to darkness, but lie awake consumed by the desire to return to Paradise. Tomorrow, during the endless daylight hours, I will live in this Hell-on Earth, surrounded by the smell of dirt.

Monday, driving home after piano lessons:

"What's for dinner?" Mia, the seven-year-old, asks.

Distracted by her tinny voice, I swerve, but quickly recover my composure and grip the steering wheel so tightly that my bones shine through the knuckles, bumpy like freshwater pearls. I adjust the rearview mirror to watch the children's reaction. "We're having road kill."

"Road kill *again?*" says Charlie, the little one, sounding disappointed. He crams nearly all of one chubby fist into his mouth, leaving out the grimy thumb to dig in his nose.

"She doesn't mean it. She means fast food," Mia explains to her brother. I don't even try to set her straight. Let her think whatever she wants, but we are having road kill.

They look out the same window to the right—dark brows raised expectantly—silent as we drive past the taco stand and then the last possible fried chicken stop before home. The highway narrows to a one-lane dirt road. Dust swirls around the car, darkening the windows to brown.

"You don't really *mean* it, do you?" Mia asks at last, averting her eyes from the mirror. She chews her fingertips, and grimaces as she pulls the nail away from the quick.

"You're almost twelve. It's fine with *me* if you'd like to learn how to cook dinner for yourself," I say.

Mia shudders, and her chin juts out. "I wish my *real* mom was still alive!" she says. She turns her head away. I flip up the mirror to practice my smile, determined to teach myself how to fully utilize my teeth.

Tuesday night:

I hear the pup scratching at the back door, and kick Jacob's shin, hard. "It's your turn to let her in, dear."

My husband grumbles and pulls off all the freshly laundered sheets, tumble-dried with fabric softener that smells of mown grass. Bathed in moonlight, he stands, stretches with his elbows up, then raises his arms—fists clenched—into a "V."

He rubs his eyes and sits back on the edge of the bed. "I let her in the last time," he says.

"Well," I say calmly, "as far as *I'm* concerned, cut off her legs and little Fluffy would just about fit in the barbecue."

Jacob groans and hurries from the room, his heel catching on the sheet. The fabric rips, sounding like a faraway cry.

* * *

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Wednesday morning:

No one talks while they eat breakfast. Charlie stirs the dark glop in his bowl every once in a while, lowering his head to crinkle up his nose at the smell.

Mia looks at the black thing on her plate, checks the clock, then reads the comics page. She pretends she's not hungry, probably planning to beg for treats at school. She sees me watching and her face goes red; she picks at the food with her fork.

Jacob tips his cup, watching as the oily coffee oozes onto the table. He clears his throat, and stands to look toward the door. "Well, gotta get to work," he says, quietly. He checks his pocket for the keys. "Why don't you let me drop the kids off today?"

"Fine," I say. "That will give me a little more time around the house."

Noon, Thursday:

I drive to the preschool and stand in the hallway, waiting with the others who wait for their children. Someone's mother, Melissa's I think, tries to make small talk. "We sure miss seeing little Charlie at the house," she says. "I'd like you to know that he's still welcome to come and play any time."

She does not try to hide that she's a busybody masquerading as a concerned friend. "This must have been quite an adjustment for all of you," she says, her voice dripping with sympathy.

I silence her with one sideways glance.

Miss Nancy, Charlie's teacher, pokes her head into the hall. She catches my eye and motions for me to join her in a dark anteroom.

We sit at a low table on hard plastic chairs with our seats just twelve inches from the ground. "I'm worried about Charlie," she says, as if conspiring with me against him.

"What's he done now?" I ask, resting my elbows upon my knees.

"Rolly, our hamster, got loose yesterday, and must have run away. I couldn't find her anywhere. When I talked to the children to ask what had happened, Charlie admitted that he *ate* Rolly."

She pauses, awaiting my reply.

"I'll be glad to replace your hamster," I say, secretly pleased. So the little one has gone and eaten the school pet! A feeling of excitement courses through me. Maybe there's still hope for him, after all.

Friday, before midnight:

The week draws to a close. Charlie has asked that I wake him before walking to the small forest, where I sometimes go to watch the stars. When Jacob heard of this plan, he said "no" and pulled Charlie—who kicked and screamed—to bed. "He needs his sleep," Jacob said in protest, but I saw the fear in his eyes. He does not try to stop me, now.

Charlie seems surprised to see me in his room. "You're here!" he says.

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"I didn't think you'd come." He dresses quickly, then runs ahead, out the front door to the gravel driveway. He throws a few stones against the house, giggling when one hits the window. He catches up to me at the mailbox; we walk down the road toward the path that leads up the hill.

Charlie kicks up the dirt on the road. "Dad's been so mean since our Mom died," he says. "He makes me go to bed too early." He stumbles and reaches for my hand. "It's dark," he says. "I can't see good." His grip is cold, his skin clammy. "I hate Dad," he says in a clear voice, this boy, this uncommon child I have started to think of as my son.

"Perhaps we'll set the trees on fire," I say, "to give us a little more light."

"Cool!" Charlie says. "Could we? Really?"

Saturday afternoon:

I mince the meat, soaking up the blood into a piece of hard bread, which I will cook into a breakfast pudding. I add mayonnaise to make a salad, chopped chicken beaks for texture, a sprig of parsley for looks. I don't bother with seasoning; they can add their own salt, if they care.

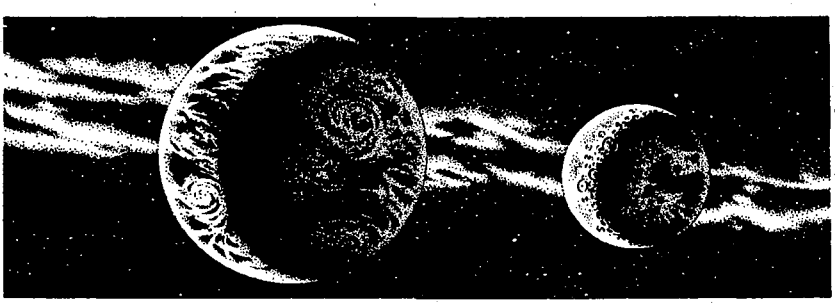
Jacob sets the table. I know he wants to question me, and finally, he asks quietly, "Can you ever be happy here?"

If I were a good angel, I would tell him that I loved him. "I'm making us all a very large pot of stew so I won't need to cook again for a week," I say.

Jacob sucks in his breath. "Sometimes I wonder if you're here because you think you have to be," he says in a whisper.

He is right, I *have* to be here, though now, I no longer feel trapped. Free will, I think. Has he never heard of it? I will raise Charlie as my own, teach him to be bad. Perhaps we shall both be banished from this Hell. "I never thought such happiness was possible," I say.

He stares at me, brow furrowed, lips parted. I think Jacob realizes that I'm telling the truth. His shoulders drop and he shakes his head, my husband, who has struggled with an angel, and lost. ●



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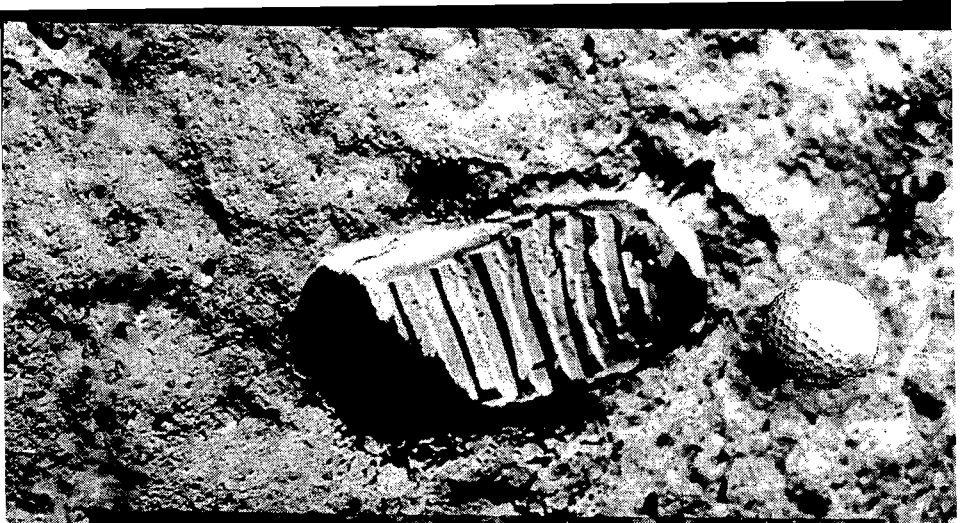

A REFLECTION ON THE APOLLO MOON MISSIONS

it will survive after Earth has reclaimed all else
when countless millennia from now
the aliens land and step out
into the airless gray rough of the Moon
and look down and comprehend
this last lost golf ball

white sphere
perfectly dimpled
engineered to fly true
numbered with a universal prime
the Pinnacle (perhaps)
of man's achievements

—Robert Frazier

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Greg Abraham

POYEKHALI

The author tells us that he continues to climb mountains, lift weights, and live in Portland, Oregon. His latest tale is set in the same "Noiesni" universe as "Front Man" (*Asimov's*, June 1997). Mr. Abraham has made a couple of trips to Russia—combining elements of research, pleasure, and business. "These experiences with the former Soviet Union have affected me as a person and as a writer. 'Poyekhali' bears witness to that influence."

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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It was my habit of thought, of course. Horace hadn't come to the clinic to get his medication, and I took it as a reminder that I'm as ineffectual as I am overweight. This was the third time he'd done it, too. I could get him arrested now, because the County didn't want him wandering around with tuberculosis and HIV. Arrest! I wasn't quite ready to hang that sword over his head, though.

Horace was my last patient of the day, so I decided to hunt him down. As a public health nurse, this is one of my privileges: to play my own warden, to chase truant TB patients who don't report for their meds. Because when it comes to TB, half a treatment is worse than none. If a patient isn't cured, the toughest strains survive and turn him into a walking petri dish.

I hung up my clinic jacket and left the exam room for the office. We keep the patients' addresses on file.

But as I passed the front desk, I saw one of *them*. One of the Noiesni. She was arguing with our receptionist.

I picked up my pace. I don't have much use for the Noiesni. Sure, their arrival a couple years ago had been big news. Extraterrestrials! And it had been such a deftly handled arrival, too. They waited for rumors to accumulate and then, when the timing was tantalizingly perfect, they presented themselves to talk-show hosts and PR agencies. They made all the right moves: they became Olympic sponsors and started exporting consumer goods.

And they made it clear that they hadn't come to conquer—or to heal. They merely advised.

Thanks.

On the other hand, you didn't see Noiesni very often in Spokane, especially females. This one was as tall as the males and just as gaunt. They all had that hepatitis yellow color.

"Marilyn Mathieson," I heard her say, "I *must* talk with her."

"The nurse is with a patient right now," Colleen murmured.

I knew it was an argument, because Colleen is young, and her voice gets soft when the pressure's on. So I called out, "I'm Marilyn. What do you need?"

The Noiesni looked at me, dark eyes full of hope, her smile radiant. Those eyes were as clear as her skin was yellow, as beautiful as her massive jaw was ugly. "My name is Uchad," she said.

I waited for more. On TV they joke about how the Noiesni recite eons' worth of ancestors' names and achievements. But I've heard that it's mostly a guy thing.

"Have you seen Horace Ramsey?" She made it sound *so* polite. "I understood he had an appointment this afternoon."

"That's right." I stiffened with possessiveness. Horace was *my* burden, a distraction from my own wretchedness. I walked up to the counter and edged around it.

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Uchad stood three or four inches taller than I did, and I'm hardly petite. She spoke as softly as Colleen: "We had an appointment at three o'clock. It's the first time he's missed."

"What brought you here?" I sounded rude.

"He mentioned . . ." and she shrugged. It sent a ripple down her full-length fur coat. Her *white* fur coat. Everybody jokes about the way Noiesni dress. They pretend to know us better than we do, speaking our languages perfectly, so you can't help but wonder if the joke's supposed to be on us. The coat was something she might be able to pull off in St. Petersburg, but not in Spokane.

"I didn't realize we had a Noiesni embassy here."

Colleen glanced at me, startled by the sarcasm.

It seemed to escape Uchad. Still all earnestness, she explained, "I'm not an ambassador. What I am . . . I suppose it translates as *historian*. Horace and I trade. I teach him about Noiesni math. And he teaches me about spacemen."

That didn't make any sense. The Noiesni *were* the spacemen. And space*women*. The intimacy of her tone made me bristle. I couldn't trade anything with Horace. All I could do was coerce him.

From the way they gaped, you could see that the last few patients in the lobby also thought Uchad looked ridiculous. And she was still staring at me, eyes rounded and hopeful.

"C'mon," I said. "I'm going to his place as soon as I find his address." My brown plastic raincoat hung on the rack. Plastic's easy to clean. Brown's hard to stain. It's a natural for a public health nurse. It kind of crackled as I pulled it on.

"I know where he lives." Uchad pushed long, dark hair away from her face. If it hadn't been for that craggy, twisted Noiesni maw, she would have been as lovely as any *Mirabella* model.

Good thing for her she wasn't.

My car isn't anything special. By choice, nothing I have is. I threw an old sweater into the back seat to make room for Uchad.

We drove toward a shabby part of town. She said almost nothing, but it's hard to despise somebody when they're sitting next to you in your car. At a streetlight I reached over and touched the cuff of her coat. In my best girl-to-girl tone of voice, which frankly isn't very persuasive, I asked her, "What kind of fur? Nice." Showy and inappropriate as hell, but nice.

"Amur tiger."

"God . . ." My foot slipped off the brake and I started to roll into the intersection.

"The pelts were grown from a single cell," she added nonchalantly. "A gift from a Siberian game warden. We're working with her to deploy Noiesni sensors to catch poachers."

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I pouted. "It would still look better on a tiger."

"The cell was taken from a rescued cub. Somebody *else* is wearing its mother."

She made *else* sound sleazy and—of course—human. I stomped on the gas when the light changed. But I had to admit to myself that the Noiesni *did* help. The rub was that they helped in the same little ways we might help ourselves, if we just bothered.

So much for chat.

We silently wound up in front of a community center next to an old church. Uchad told me that Horace did odd jobs and lived in the basement. We got out.

The whole place ached of misfortune. Chapped hands, dirty socks, child abuse, suicide: name the woe and you could sense it in the foyer. It should have smelled like urine, even if it didn't really. Uchad led me by the gymnasium. We descended stairs and passed a softboard with AA notices tacked to it, went down a hall that ran beneath the courtshoe ker-thump of the gym, passed a janitor's closet, and stopped outside a door.

Uchad knocked. I knocked. Uchad knocked again. Obviously worried, she gestured toward the door as if dismissing some minor annoyance.

The lights went out.

I stumbled. Earthquake? I told my pulse not to double, triple.

But there was still light after all. Dim light. We were somewhere else.

I looked at Uchad. Everybody has heard that the Noiesni can travel anywhere instantly, but she could have at least warned me. I asked with a flatness that she must be getting tired of by now, "Why did we bother to drive?"

"I thought you wanted to."

"This is like breaking in. It's illegal."

She again gestured toward the door, this time as if to say she wasn't going to twist my arm to stay. Of course not. Nobody ever does.

Dusky light tipped in through one of those depressing basement windows up by the ceiling. The room wasn't much bigger than a walk-in closet, and the floor held Horace's universe. Against one wall, a futon. At the foot of it, bottles of scotch, vodka, bourbon. Piled along the other wall were stacks of books and photocopies, not all of them in English. Lots of them were about mathematics, others about space travel. Beneath the window stood cross-country skis and poles. I ran my finger along the delicate arc of one of the skis. For a fatso like me, there was something mystical about them and the freedom they implied. No, I didn't know much of Horace's story. He'd been born in Montana. Scholarships had taken him east. HIV had taken him down. He'd come home to die, but his family's rejection had kept him heading west. He'd lost momentum before reaching Seattle, though, and he'd come to a halt in the Palouse, in Spokane.

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Uchad settled onto the floor, her fur heaped around her. She picked up a framed photo, the only one in the room. An old picture, black and white, it showed a young man in uniform smiling for the camera.

"Horace's father?" I wondered aloud. Horace was only twenty-five, still young enough to keep on loving somebody who'd written him off. The man in the picture looked too happy to despise anybody, though. His resemblance to his son was mostly in the features, not in the picture's high-spirited mood.

A key rattled in the lock. I gripped one of the skis. Uchad smiled as she looked over her shoulder toward the door.

Horace stood still in a khaki parka, not particularly clean, its collar stained. He wore a BDU cap pulled low, like a gaunt, young, and far-too-shabby model from one of those *Be all you can be* ads. His eyes were riveted to the picture, and I knew that it mattered more than anything in the room. He coughed before answering Uchad's smile with his own.

And finally he saw me. He pointed toward the skis. "Haven't had the heart to pawn 'em." He tugged off the cap and shook out his tawny hair while he settled to the floor and eased the picture from Uchad's hands. "Sorry about missing our meeting. The bus got back late."

No apologies for me. My hand slipped from a ski to a pole. Part of me wanted to lift it and poke him. "Where were you? This is the third time you've missed."

Horace lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes. He gestured again toward the skis. "Fall's in the air. Since I probably won't make winter this year, I wanted to be outside." Dying had taught him to abandon many things, like reticence. He wasn't embarrassed to attack me with his death itself. "The park bureau had a tour bus down to Steptoe Butte today. Quite the group. One AIDS and twenty-nine AARPS." His eyes gleamed wickedly now. "The view was spectacular." He scooted over to the futon and reached for the bourbon. "A beautiful fall day, and now I come home to friends."

I took the bait. "Uchad let me in." And he'd pushed me a little too far: "I can have you arrested until the TB's gone."

He cranked the top off the bottle. "They'll have to put me in solitary." He hacked maliciously.

I fumbled in my pocket and pulled out a cellophane packet. "You might want to wash these down with something other than booze." Isoniazid, rifampin, pyrazinamide, ethambutol. Toxic hepatitis was a side effect of mixing isoniazid and alcohol, and before long he'd look as yellow as Uchad.

He snatched the packet and popped the pills and capsules into his mouth, then pulled a shot from his bottle. He wiped his mouth, just slowly enough that I didn't know whether it was indifference or belligerence. "It'll cure me or kill me, and either way, I won't be infecting anybody."

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He meant it to hurt, and it did. "You're so sure that I don't care. Why? Because I don't cry?" And no, I wouldn't. He had to deal with one death—his own. In my work, I'd dealt with a hundred, and probably with a thousand before I was done. Not jaded, no, and I don't know why I've never been able to go numb. But tired, yes, I'm awfully tired.

He searched his room, eyes resting on the picture, then on the skis before he stared into the shadows. "I know that you care," he mumbled, "but you're a day late and a dollar short, that's all."

HIV was killing him faster than it did some people. I knew he'd fought hard, and more or less on his own. All right, he was tired, too, and he understood that a truce with me probably *wasn't* a truce with death. And so, maybe that left nothing to fight except me.

Uchad rocked closer to him and ran her hand through his hair. They were so familiar with each other. I had to remind myself that jealousy's a form of self-pity. "How about dinner?" she asked. "All of us?"

Horace's thumb pivoted toward the impromptu bar. "A drink first?"

"Of course." She shifted onto the futon next to him.

I loathed the idea of getting down to the floor. I'd look like a hippo descending and a beached whale on the way back up. As I started to kneel, one of my vertebrae popped. My nose was about a foot from the picture. "Your dad?"

"No such luck." Horace shrugged.

"Yuri Gagarin," Uchad volunteered.

"And who's *that*?" On my hands and knees, I felt stupid enough already.

"A man who knew when to say yes to a drink," Horace told me with hushed disdain.

I'm a miner's canary when it comes to picking up food poisoning, so I rarely go out to eat. Much to my discredit, an extraterrestrial did a better job than I of finding a restaurant.

A chance of a lifetime, spaghetti marinara with a Noiesni, but I had nothing to say. I mostly listened while Uchad and Horace nattered about their dead Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, first man in space, hero extraordinaire. The son of Russian collectivists, he survived both the Germans and starvation during the Second World War. At thirteen, he went to Moscow to find his fortune. From a foundry he made his way into the air force. A runt, a communist, a man with a deep gaze and a kind smile, he was both physically and ideologically a perfect fit for the Soviet Union's first manned spacecraft. Just like that, humankind entered the spacefaring age.

Uchad seemed a lot more impressed than I did. What was orbiting the earth compared to bounding around instantaneously? You can never figure the Noiesni.

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Too bad, though, that Gagarin had to come back to earth. He only lasted another seven years, then died suspiciously in the crash of a fighter jet. His buddies knew it was the booze. The investigators knew it was slovenly training. Little communist kids knew it was the Americans. It just sounded like bad luck to me.

By now, Horace had abandoned his veal cutlet—ordered from the children's menu, with the waiter dissenting—and started to toy with his peas. I stared at the last of my mashed potatoes. Margarine stained them about the same color as Uchad's skin. Why did the first cosmonaut matter to a person with AIDS and to a space alien? He sure didn't matter to me. My feet were swollen. Today's pay had stopped at five o'clock, and it was nearing eight. I'd been at it for fourteen hours, and I'd stopped earning comp time back in August. I'd already accrued my maximum vacation. Caring isn't just hard. It's like robbing yourself. It's dumb. I sighed.

Horace watched as if reading my mind. He fumbled for his wallet and pulled out a small laminated card. It landed in the middle of the table. A Xeroxed picture of Gagarin, handsome in a bomber's hat. No beaming smile here, just those eyes deep as dreams, alive as a child's.

"You think I'm nuts, don't you?" Horace mumbled. "I'm sick, but I haven't lost it yet." He picked the picture back up. "Sure, he's dead, but pretty soon I will be, too, and it's important to keep good company when you're dying. I found the dead hero of a dead society. I don't feel quite so alone." He focused on the picture and blinked, his eyes like wet agate in a stream. "Nobody ever showed me how to live or how to die. It's been a real juggling act though, figuring out how to live *by* figuring out how to die. So a hero helps." He met my gaze straight on. "Say it's an emotional version of the placebo effect . . . but if it works? Nobody ever gave me a hero. Just news and football. So I recruited elsewhere, thank you."

He leaned forward. Using a corner of the picture to clean beneath a thumbnail, he whispered, "This was the first person to leave the earth and come back alive. The *first*. Nobody else can ever do that. And me? I just get to leave."

He looked tired and too gaunt. I realized now that the day had been harder on him than on me. He still whispered: "And America pretends he doesn't matter, just like it pretends people like me don't matter. Queer people. Dying people. Give the world news and football, then pray that it forgets anything too real."

Horace started to hack. People stared. He got up and put the picture away. When the attack subsided, he rasped, "I'm going to the bathroom. If the waiter comes, could you get me some ice cream? I hate football, but I sure like ice cream." And he left, hunched in his parka that he hadn't taken off all evening.

I imagined a cross-country skier vaulting toward a snowy, terrifying cliff. Alone.

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My hands—one of the few parts of my body except for my calves where you can see my veins—rested on the table. The lights seemed too harsh. Horace reminded me that it isn't just the body that dies, but the dreams, the loves, and the unhealed wounds.

Right then the waiter came up. Uchad ordered a sundae and a piece of apple pie. I made that two pieces of pie. We sat there, and the background chatter pressed me to say something.

I looked toward the hallway that had swallowed up Horace. "And what does all that have to do with you?"

"Parallax," Uchad said.

Inscrutability doesn't impress me. I shook my head.

She raised her fork. "When you look at it with one eye and then the other, it shifts position." She demonstrated. Such lovely lashes in such an ugly face, I thought, while she went on, "That's where depth perception comes from. That's why many species have two eyes. At least two."

And that didn't impress me either. "What you're telling me is that Horace is about as different from this Gagarin as anybody you could find."

"The similarities matter as much as the differences." Uchad put down her fork and stroked the cuff of her coat. "Horace found Gagarin. And he found me, too. He was corresponding with a library in Russia, struggling to get copies of source materials. The library didn't have a copier, but it did have me. That's when Horace and I began to correspond. I wound up moving my office here from Moscow. More comfortable. And yes, Horace has become part of *my* source material. He understands things I never might have."

"He should. He's human." It sounded as nasty as I meant it to.

Uchad turned away. "I'm glad you think so. Not everybody does."

One of the joints in my jaw cracked as I clenched it: "What does Horace get in the bargain? Why don't you make him better?"

The waiter returned with our desserts. Uchad stared down at her folded hands, thumbs resting against the table. We've all heard the cracks about the Noiesni's backward thumbs. It makes our keyboards hell for them.

"He's learned a lot about Noiesni mathematics," she told me.

"I thought you were a historian." It was my way of saying big deal.

"In our language, *mathematics* and *history* have a common root. It means *key*." Without warning Uchad got up and started for the bathroom. "He didn't look well."

"He hasn't looked well for a long time," I said to her back.

Bitter and alone now, I sat transfixed by my pie. Food gives you pleasure without judging you, at least not until the heart attack comes.

A thud echoed in the hallway.

Even a fatso can move fast when she has to.

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I barged around the corner and saw Horace sprawled out and hacking near the end of the hall. Uchad bent over him.

My hand landed on his shoulder as I braked. His hair and the parka collar reeked of sweat. And no restaurant smells were going to disguise the stench of fear.

He wrenched away from me and I saw a pink stain below his lip.

No. His lungs couldn't be hemorrhaging. The reports said his X-rays had looked good when he'd left the hospital. And he hadn't missed *that* much of his medication. Unless his T cell count had plummeted to nothing, he should be getting over the TB. But *should* didn't have much to do with it. If he had an eroded bronchial artery . . .

I took hold of Uchad's arm. "Care to get us to a hospital?"

"No," Horace groaned.

Uchad froze, then shook her head in a slow *no*.

Instead of smacking her, I lumbered away in exasperation to find a phone. The restaurant manager intercepted me with his cellular, though he cringed when I dialed the ambulance outfit that carries the county contract. I know it from memory. Ambulances probably weren't welcome during dinner. I returned the phone and strode back down the hall.

Horace had braced himself in a corner. He was scribbling with a pen. On the *wallpaper*.

"What. . . ?"

Uchad glared at me. "Noiesni math."

Horace's array of strokes straggled along. "The shape of each world," he mumbled, "bending in four dimensions, collapsing into ten, and shifted by everyone who ever thought or felt. . . ." He rested his head against the wall and glanced at Uchad with tired laughter in his eyes. "This would be easier if I didn't have to keep guessing the constants."

Dumbfounded, I watched him scratch away. Like a kid recalling a difficult lesson, he recited in time to his marks: "Roll up a *world,* bring it around in a *ring,* shrink it again, *forever.*"

Uchad stood directly over him now. Her finger lighted on a point between two strings of symbols. "The transform route to the pavilions . . . where did you find it?"

She wasn't nearly as amused as he was. "The address?" he asked. "It was on your desk, in a note you left for one of the other Noiesni." His forehead damp with sweat, he babbled, "Substitute one imploding moment into the matrices and—and we're human, and it *does* change the equations—so renormalize here . . ." He wrote faster.

Uchad stiffened. "Hold on! I didn't show you *that.*"

Horace caught a short, painful breath. But he still managed to grin. "You didn't have to show me. Everything else here implies it. Let's give it a try."

He was bleeding inside. I knew it hurt, and he was fighting to concen-

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trate. I pressed closer and wrestled with the sweat-drenched collar of his parka. His carotid pulse fluttered.

Then it was gone.

I grabbed for his wrist.

But like his pulse, it wasn't there. My hand slipped *through* it.

The pen rolled across the floor.

Uchad's calm disappeared. "You can't go—" She reached and her hand swept through his arm, through the wall.

The manager yelped from the end of the hall. Uchad had hold of me now, and there was no mistaking the panic in her twisted face.

"Hang on!"

And that was when darkness wrapped around me and tightened like a shroud. Darkness or light, one and the same in a terrible loneliness, a loneliness that crawled up my spine, loneliness as cold as a snowstorm, avalanche deep, conquering all who dared ski between the stars, loneliness as bitter as a sheet drawn over a lifeless face.

Beauty can calm terror, but it takes a moment, I suppose. I stood on a lawn and above me floated the better part of a galaxy, its spiral arms just like the pictures in astronomy magazines. Even in their stillness, they made me dizzy.

Cool air whispered past my ear.

"Where?" I sighed. A spiral arm led my gaze back down to the grass, to the shadowy trees, to the softly lit pavilions that surrounded what seemed to be a park.

Uchad searched the distance. "This is where I do my work," she answered absently. "You might call it a museum." She pointed upward. "And that's home. Mine *and* yours."

"We've come . . ." If there were no meaningful words for the distance, it had been captured by the loneliness that still chilled my blood and marrow.

"More than a hundred thousand light years," she told me.

"And Horace too?"

Uchad gestured toward one building in the distance. "I think we'll find him there." She drew her coat tight and started through the trees. Noticing me hesitate, she said, "We have the place to ourselves. We're off the beaten track."

So in silence I strode along beside her, with the dew of another world soaking my shoes. I asked myself how a dying man had come a hundred thousand light years. An answer waited in the night air, heavy with meaning. It was as if I breathed the significance of Horace's scribbled equations, as real here as the billions of stars above me.

"Horace?" I called out, just to hear a sound. I tasted wonder in the air, pure and cool, along this promenade of façades that glimmered amid groves of starlit maples that weren't quite maples and amid jasmine-

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sweet gardens. Meaning really did waft on the air, and it said that, in dying, each of us is free to work our own miracles.

That made little sense to me. I'm not a mystic, and the only miracle I believe in is survival. "Horace!" I cried out again.

Uchad broke the solitude of the place: "It isn't only the Noiesni who've built their monuments here. The park commemorates first flights. Oh, not all of them, not even most. There are many ways to tame gravity and lightspeed. Machines. Wormholes. Bend dimensionality itself, as we do, consciously—"

"Dimensions and consciousness?" I interrupted. "Is that what Horace figured out?"

"He cheated. But I'm impressed that he cheated so well."

We had arrived at the end of the park, and I stood in front of the most ramshackle of the pavilions. It reminded me of a concert hall I'd seen in Buenos Aires. That trip had been my one and only long journey away from home. Now I stood in front of a building inconceivably farther away, but eerily similar in its decay. The stone steps whispered beneath the soles of my shoes as we climbed. From here I saw cracks in the façade.

Above me perched carved gargoyles with stacks of eyes instead of pairs. Lots of parallax there, I supposed.

We passed beneath an arch, and here was a wide foyer. The air wasn't dank or stale, but anemic light spoke of a long and heavy past. Ahead of us waited another entrance, this one with curtains, like a theater's.

Uchad went over and sank onto a wooden bench ornamented at the ends of the arms with more gargoyle faces. Beside it was piled a heap of newspapers.

Newspapers?

"Whose pavilion is this?"

"It's mine now." Uchad stared down at the papers. "I've claimed it. The owners disappeared before they ever completed it. They were a species progressing rapidly in their development. Like the Noiesni, they learned to shape space. Apparently they learned to shape other things as well. They've gone on to—what?" She looked up and smiled. It was so human that I wondered why I had to keep reminding myself that she wasn't. "In case you were wondering, no, we Noiesni are *not* the most advanced people in the universe. I'm just beginning to make sense of this place."

She slid to the other end of the bench and folded her hand into a fist in front of the curtains. A web of light began to condense in the air. Beautiful, it hovered and reminded me somehow of Horace's equations. I sensed meanings woven there that went beyond words.

"What does this have to do with Horace?" I stepped closer to the rainbow strands.

"You humans may disappear as suddenly as they did," she said, "but not because you're moving into other realities. Because—"

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I resented the way she said it, *You humans,* and I cut her off. "Because we'll destroy ourselves? That's what you *Noiesni* have been implying all along. That we're going to—"

"And you very likely will."

Frustration spilled out all by itself: "Then why don't you—"

"Help?" she said, fire in her eyes. And this time she whispered it as desperately as I have, awakening at two or three in the morning: "*Help?* What do you want us to fix *first?*" She reached up, and her trembling hand rested on my forearm. The anger in that hand felt like my own. "How could we fix it *all* and do it so that you'd still be *you* when we were done? You live in as rich and wonderful a world as ever existed. The problems are in *you,* but tampering with your spirit—if we could—would be no better than enslaving you, and maybe worse."

Another voice came from the doorway: "Marilyn, you need to look at what she *is* doing."

I spun around in time to see Horace gesture toward Uchad. His palm opened. So much respect there, but resignation, too. He came forward unsteadily. "Look at those newspapers."

His expression, deliberate to the point of frightening, kept me from going to him. My knees popped as I settled onto the bench. I dutifully lifted the papers into my lap. They were so new you could still smell the ink.

The New York *Times.* April 9, 1961. A headline told me that *FOOD-PEACE PLAN SEEKS 11 BILLION . . . McGovern Proposes 5-Year Program to Nourish and Clothe Needy of World.*

I'd been a very little girl back then. And it was ancient news indeed. Somewhere along the line we'd stopped dreaming of feeding a world's worth of hungry people.

April 11, a couple days later: *TRIAL OF EICHMANN OPENS BEFORE ISRAELI TRIBUNAL.* That headline reminded me there would always be more to feed than people's bodies. There was the spirit, and until it was nurtured, too, the tormented few would always devour the many. Maybe Uchad was right, maybe our pain ran too deep to fix from the outside. Could it be fixed at all?

On April 12, a banner headline:

SOVIET ORBITS MAN AND RECOVERS HIM; SPACE PIONEER REPORTS: 'I FEEL WELL'; SENT MESSAGES WHILE CIRCLING EARTH. You couldn't miss the awe in the late city edition's headline.

I put the papers down.

Horace stood close and gazed at the paper. "The Noiesni travel faster than light," he murmured. "They travel faster than anything. If they stop far enough away from the earth and look back, they can watch Gagarin's flight. They can go closer and watch a jet crash seven years later. Or go farther away and see a little boy skiing the winter before the Germans

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came to destroy his world. The *past* in infinite detail, and Uchad has brought it all here."

Without warning, he went around the field of woven light, then wrestled his way past the curtains.

Uchad leapt up.

I leaned over. A vertebra cracked as I reached for her elbow. "What's going on?"

"He told you . . . I'm holding onto your *human* past, against the time you'll want to hang onto it for yourselves." She glanced at the curtains. "He's come this far. There's no point in stopping him now. Join us?" She ducked in.

That past had me by the back of the neck and sent a chill down my spine. It takes a lot to scare me, though. I sidestepped the light and followed them both.

And I squinted into warm sun on my face, a brisk breeze on my cheek. Far off to my left, grass danced in the wind amid skiffs of snow. To my right spread a huge concrete apron. And on it, nestled in its green gantry, rose a rocket that shone like long-forgotten dreams. Beneath it, men in uniforms shambled around. Men and women in coveralls hurried with more purpose. They were all oblivious to us.

"Where. . . ?"

"Tyuratam," murmured Horace as he moved ahead of us. "Kazakhstan, 1961. Over there!" Summoning strength to stay steady on his feet, he pointed.

There were a few vintage cars and jeeps, men in dark suits, and reporters with their boxy cameras. In the middle of their circle stood a man in an orange spacesuit, helmet tucked beneath his arm.

Gagarin. I recognized him from the picture in Horace's room, and from the one he'd tugged out at the restaurant. The cosmonaut looked small . . . even smaller than the men around him.

I'd been holding my breath. Now air finally poured back into my lungs. "Time travel?" I wondered aloud.

Uchad shook her head no. And Horace ignored me, pointing again: "Over there!" His arm trembled with excitement. "The old guy in the overcoat and hat. That's Korolev. He's masterminded the whole thing, the whole space program. Done a lot of his work in a labor camp, kidneys aching the whole time."

"Not time travel," Uchad whispered, "but in a sense real. A moment enclosed in its own time and space, unreal only in that entry is forbidden. Mix separate realities," she cautioned, "and the equations become too complex to separate."

More talk about equations. But I could almost grasp them. They rode the brisk air, and excitement stole into my lungs along with them. The

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breeze carried Gagarin's words, too. Those equations, that made this place so real, brought the sense of his words along with their sound:

"*Good friends, those I know and those I've never met, countrymen and people of all nations and continents! In the next few minutes, a powerful rocket will lift me into the vast distances of space. . . .*" He fidgeted with his helmet and glanced downward for a moment, as if searching his heart: "*And what would I like to say to you in these last few minutes before liftoff?*"

The Russian words were as light and soft as sand hastening through an hourglass: "*Fsya maya zhizn . . .*" And the equations, warm in my chest, chilly along my spine, whispered meanings: "*All my life . . . all my life now appears as one beautiful instant. Everything I've lived through and everything I've done until now was lived through and done for this moment. . . .*"

Horace spat and roved farther ahead. The sputum showed filaments of red.

"Careful!" Uchad called out.

The breeze licked my face. He ignored her and mustered his strength. He veered toward Gagarin.

Uchad broke into a run. Then she halted, her craggy face contorted by the dread of getting trapped in her own creation.

I was already backing away.

She cried out: "You know it's not all real—"

Horace spun and hollered back, "Real enough!" He looked over his shoulder and followed the lines of the rocket with his eyes. "Equations?" he asked with all the rawness of his voice. "Meanings . . . meanings that raised me beyond myself. . . ." He started to run again.

I backed away toward the wall, listening to Gagarin's fading speech, watching Horace flee toward the crowd, pushing my way past the weight of the curtains. One hand hovered above strands of light. The other blocked the curtain open.

"Uchad!" I yelled.

She turned just enough to see where I stood. She nodded.

And Horace still ran, the last of his life hammering through his heels against the launch pad. He raised his hand, he waved and cried and shouted.

Gagarin turned.

And I whipped my fist through that web of light. I tore at truth and invention. All of it lodged within me. For an instant I knew the recklessness of heroes, the frightened hunger of a boy who grew up to reach for the stars, the joy of being the very first to do a great and dangerous thing.

I tore at the colorful strands because it was the only way I knew of keeping Horace in *our* world, the one where *we* lived. Dying or not, this was where he belonged, until death. . . .

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I heard a bitter cry and looked inside.

Horace lay in a heap on an empty floor.

Overhead, a clear dome as vast as the hall let the soft light of a galaxy pour in. Uchad stood stiff.

And Yuri Gagarin knelt beside Horace.

Drawn by a nurse's reflexes, I entered. Horace struggled for air. I walked faster, but it was a long journey, made beneath all those stars. As I came close, his crumpled body heaved. The air here—if I closed my eyes, I could still feel Tyuratam on my face.

When I opened them, Gagarin had settled on the floor to hold a dying man. They might have been brothers. Horace, lanky and younger. Gagarin, stockier, his short hair slightly receding. And there was no fear in the cosmonaut's eyes, nothing more than the confusion that he was quick to rein in. Those eyes met Uchad's. He seemed to grasp this place.

My hand came to rest on Horace's forehead. Hot. No need to reach for his neck, because I felt a pulse fluttering in his temple. No lungs, no immune system, and he was suffocating.

I reached down and shifted his weight toward me, still meaning to claim him for the living.

Gagarin resisted. I stepped away.

His arm folded around Horace. "Where do they go," he asked softly, "the souls of the dead?" Whether he spoke in English or Russian or in the pure meaning of the pavilion's equations, I'm not sure. But he spoke in a gentle tenor voice.

"We don't know." Uchad told him.

"Not even the Noiesni?" Gagarin grinned as she stiffened.

"Yes, I *know* you," he murmured. "And the ones who built this place . . . but I'm not sure there's any way to talk about them." He cocked a scarred eyebrow, then sighed and turned his attention back to Horace. The grin faded.

Uchad shook her head. She shrugged out of her coat and laid it on the floor. For the first time, I saw the dress underneath, pale rose and peasant-like in its simplicity. Gagarin noticed, too, as she helped him ease Horace onto the coat. Her wrists looked fragile enough to snap, but muscle corded the length of her arm.

"He's dying," Gagarin said. "Tough business. I died once. But you never meant for me to remember that, did you?" He glanced again at Uchad. And those narrowed eyes: he could have been any man on the streets of Spokane, except the weight of the past and a knowledge of death deepened them. "I remember." He rested Horace's head against his leg.

"He was looking for you," Uchad whispered.

"He barely found me in time. I shouldn't have been so hard to find." He smiled as he brushed Horace's hair back and wiped his hand on the heavy orange cloth of his spacesuit.

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"He never knew you," Uchad said, "but he remembered you."

Gagarin looked up through the dome, his lips parting as he watched the galaxy poised above us. "We're so far away," he whispered, "far from the coal mines, the dams, the steel yards, from the others that remembered me without knowing me." He looked back down at Horace and sat very still, the way a child keeps still in the presence of a wounded animal.

Horace stirred. He groaned and started to roll onto his side.

Gagarin caught him by the shoulder and steadied him, Horace's pale skin and shaggy hair stark against the bright orange.

He opened his eyes. And they were so full of relief that there was no room left for awe or even love. Rough, quick breathing measured the silence.

Gagarin leaned over and in the steady voice of a brother or friend, told him, "I once herded the stars around our planet. Alone, I watched the world and the universe as none of us had ever seen them before. And no small part of the wonder was knowing how much I loved the people and the world that launched me. Nothing ever separated that love from that wonder." His jaw brushed Horace's ear. "In becoming heroes, we have to love, because the world is as alone as we are. Peoples, civilizations, galaxies . . . it doesn't really matter, because in the darkness we're all alone. I saw it, and I knew that from that day on, heroes would be measured only by their love. I hoped for a lot of things the day I flew. That you'd come looking for me was one of them. See? In a way I remember you, too."

The ragged breathing ceased.

Gagarin sighed. His chest fell, then lifted again with the discontent of the living.

I tried to lose myself in the stars overhead. I turned away. Death always won. Even here.

But a hand took hold of mine, a man's hand, slightly rough and so warm, like a spring day. "And I remember you, too."

Tired—very tired—I shook my head no.

"Yes," he said. "You're the one who tries to save the world, who tries to make it better. And I promise you, it's easier to orbit the world than to change it. You're very brave."

I shut my eyes against the praise. Praise doesn't make an impossible job any easier.

"But I *do* remember you," he murmured. "You're the quiet one who, when I was young and things got desperate, still had something to share. And you shared it. And when there was nothing left to share, you had something for me and the other children to do, some small urgent thing that let us almost forget the hunger." His words stayed warm and alive against my ear: "You're the one who never asked whether it was good or wise to go on living. You simply saw its necessity, and you left it at that."

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He pressed something into my hand. I looked. Small green leaves, and I caught their scent, like all the earth awakening.

"Sorrel," he told me. "During the war, and even afterward, I'd get so hungry in the winter. Then in spring, I'd search the woods for sorrel and eat it. It never eased the hunger, but it tasted good."

The sorrel disappeared from my hand, and left behind nothing but its scent, its sweetness amid my own lifetime of hunger.

"Horace?" I asked aloud, looking at his body.

Gagarin went over to Uchad, who stood motionless, her arms wrapped around herself. "Can he stay?" he asked.

"He's not part of this." Helplessness left an edge to her voice.

Gagarin tipped his chin high to indicate the galaxy. "Not part of *this?* Are you sure? You borrowed this place, and there are things that none of us understand. Let him stay. What harm can it do?"

Uchad remained motionless for a long time, then turned and walked toward the curtains. On her way, she nodded once.

I started to follow her. But . . . I stopped. Of all the equations in this place, which one would let me say goodbye?

"Yuri?"

He looked up.

"You don't care that he's queer, do you?"

One corner of his mouth dimpled. "I don't even care that he's American."

They both looked small here, almost lost. "Thank you," I told him, and rushed away. Slipping past the curtains, I stood next to Uchad and stared at the tangle of light.

Pretending she didn't see me, she ran her finger along a strand. That was enough to restore it. From there, she moved her finger to another. And another. Worry deepened the lines in her face. "I guess I've gotten in over my head."

For no reason, except maybe to offer friendship, I brushed that lovely black hair from her face. "You said that you don't know where the people who built this place went."

Uchad braided a green strand with a blue one, worked in a filament of gold. After a minute she told me, "Maybe Horace and the cosmonaut have gone there, too. Or have gone partway. I don't know."

I saw that she really didn't, and I was glad. It made her more like me.

A breath of brisk spring air crept around the curtains. I pulled them aside, and far off, near his rocket, Yuri was finishing his speech:

"*Daragiya druzya, dasvidanya.* . . . My good friends, 'Until later,' as we tell each other before going on a long trip . . . if I could only hug you all goodbye, all of you who I know and all of you I've never met, those of you who are far away, and those of you who are close . . . see you soon!"

He stepped away from the newsmen and tugged his helmet over his head, in a hurry now to board his ship.

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I couldn't see Horace anywhere.

And if there was no place for him in this world, this history, then where? Another realm? Or dead after all?

Everybody was clapping and calling out. That old man in his black coat, Korolev, pushed his way past technicians who checked the spacesuit. He grasped Yuri by his shoulders and brusquely kissed him goodbye.

Yuri hugged him, too, and kissed him back before climbing to the foot of the gantry. Ready to board the elevator, he waved and called out, "*Poyekhali!*"

Off we go! the breeze told me. Intimacy filled that cry, a human being in love with a spaceship. It was a call that went back centuries or millennia, harkening to a love of steeds and the open road. Fiery and temperamental, Yuri's rocket was coming to life.

That weary old man, Korolev, turned away.

But I saw a light in his eyes. A very familiar light, a bit wicked or playful, like agate gleaming in a stream.

He waved at me. And when he smiled, he looked as if his fat, tired body could leap with an angel's ease.

When I lifted my hand to wave back, the curtain fell shut.

Uchad made a fist over the web of light and it disappeared.

The newspapers remained. . . . *SPACE PIONEER REPORTS* . . .

The silence deepened until she said, "I should send you home now. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"Send?" My voice, but it sounded strange. The air was reluctant to lose its magic. "You aren't coming along?"

"Later. You understand, I'm sure. I'd like to make sure that everything's all right. I know it is, but . . ."

A rift had opened between creator and created. But it was a rift filled with wonder.

"Will I see you again?" I asked, embarrassed. I'm not used to acknowledging friendship. With death as an enemy, there's not much time for friends. I'm busy. But I knew that Uchad was fighting on my side after all.

"I'll drop by in a few days." She smiled.

I let myself see the beauty there. Her hand still waited in the air. I took it between both of mine. "Goodbye."

It was my voice.

And Uchad's, too: "Good—"

I brought the emptiness of the galaxy into my heart again. In darkness—like eternity hollowed out of a single moment—I trembled, cold and tired.

Through a narrow basement window a beam of a streetlight raked the floor.

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Books, papers, bedding. A life . . . *gone,* at least here, in *this* world, the only world I really knew. Yes, the doubts were already crowding in. But hadn't I had seen and even touched another world?

Hesitant, so hesitant to believe. The worrying part of my mind went on worrying: Horace would get listed as a missing person. There was dinner to pay for in a restaurant I wasn't sure I could find, even though it was across town, and not across the galaxy. Maybe Uchad would help, Uchad, a hundred thousand light years away.

Or only a step away?

But in this dark room all I was sure of was that twenty-five years was too short a life, its bitterness and beauty held in too precarious a balance.

Something glistened. Gagarin's picture. There wasn't enough light to really see it, only enough for the glass to shimmer. I picked it up as I let myself out. The picture had been more important to Horace than anything else. Over the years I've fought for lives and usually lost. And that's what it felt like, that I was holding a life, warming a hand or steadying a shoulder. I'd keep the picture in trust, against the day that Horace might want it or need it.

The long hallway was dim. The stairs, loud. I let myself out, and the night was very still, its air damp in that pre-dawn bone-chilling way. Yes, here on earth, too, a night has passed. No sleep for me. But fat and old and tired, I'd gone without sleep more than once.

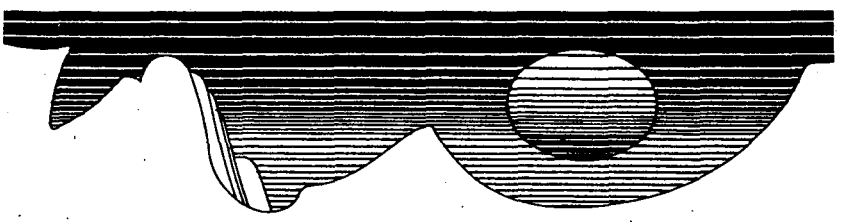
There wasn't anybody on the streets. I unlocked my car, got in, and carefully laid the picture on the seat beside me. Then I reached in back, grabbed that old sweater, and packed it around the picture. I started the car, and while it warmed up, I rested my hands on the steering wheel. I like my car.

Suddenly I rolled down the window and stared up. A scattering of stars held their own against the city light. Ahead of me waited another day of trying to heal bodies. But how the stars could heal the soul! My eyes itched, and when I rubbed them, I smelled sorrel on my hand.

I released the brake and shifted into first. I reached for a word, an equation as full of life as dawn only an hour or two away.

I remembered. "*Poyekhali,*" I said aloud.

Off we go. ●



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Avram Davidson

Vergil and the Dukos: Hic Inclusus Vitam Perdit

or, *The Imitations of the King*

We are pleased to have the opportunity to publish one of the final chapters in the late Avram Davidson's continuing saga of Vergil Magus. Avram Davidson was the only author ever to win the Hugo, the World Fantasy Award, and the mystery writers' Edgar Award. Unfortunately, the following may be the last of his brilliant and eccentric tales to appear in *Asimov's*.

Sicharbus the Sidonian, on business in Néápoly, called upon his old friend-in-fire, now the Mage Vergil. And having talked of this and that and eaten many a snail and more than one mess of garlic and semsamum-seed querned a-moil in its own oil and dipped in with crusty Calabrian bread, they fell to talk of a few lesser things than the price of purple and the cost of calamus and coin-of-gold. For . . . *does gold buy silver? or does silver buy gold?* . . . to this question not all the sages of the Midland Sea can come to a conclusion; those who would cannot compound with those who would not; *Up* goes the one end of the quiver-plank. And *down* goes the tother: so. So see now Sicharbus, his yellow face assuming a serious look, and now hear Sicharbus make a sound as he nums his bread and dipping so as to make it known he intends to talk so soon as he does swallow; let none assume to speak until he is done.

The scene is the upper room at the seaward side, the topmost floor in the house on the Street of the Horse-Jewelers. The view of the Voe of

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Naples is vast. Surely the guest means to speak of it to the host, surely the host has himself contrived it and thus deserves acclaim. Or else, like any Phoenician, this one in a moment may well speak of dye-stuff. And of dye. The price set aside, some words alike to, "Ayond the Gates of Gades, where the gryphons gyre—"

"Where do you *get* all these little pots of paints, frater mine? eh?"

Vergil spreads his dexter hand upon his bosom. *He?* Pots of paint, and little ones at that? Vergil wears a light shirt of *vinewool* distained with mallow-pink, that shade between madder and pourpre.

Says Sicharbas, he means *doors*. In his own country, in *his* country, doors are never painted. *What?* paint cedar-wood? "*Cedar*-wood to paint? In all the worlds beside the Great Sea, the Interterrains Sea, no wood like unto cedar-wood! Of course: *no!* Why would paint? For beauty? For comely? Cedar is by far the lovelier than paint. As for it should last, we don't daub it with painteries, we rubs upon it with wax. With a pure wax unfiltered from the best of bees, we rubs it, the cedars. But in the Greekly Lands, if Magna or Minora, cedar, much, they do not have. What have they? Oak, a some. Pine, such a much! And pine, though soft to cut, is quick to weather. *Much* preservation needs. All the bees in the Grecian, not sufficient wax could make. A natural thing: The Hellenes, the Achaeans also called—the Folk of the Oak, as make the Acorns—are lovers of paint. Paint they their marble, paint they their wood, all very bright—the Dans, also they are so-called—*Fear the Dans,* who it was it said that?" Vergil owned having heard it, did not know who had said it.

"In Grecia the doors are painted so brightly, your eyes they might put out with dazzle. But. *But.* From three-horned Sicilya past Néápoly northward even unto Romatown: what we see upon the doors? Here a bit of reddle paint, there a splotch of blue, somewhere else some one has a bit of green so he smears it as thin as it were tissue of gold. Always just a small of paint, always spread it thin, thin, so very very thin. . . ."

Sicharbas quaffed a quaff of beer from the wooden quaff bound about with silvern bands, rolled his eyes above the rim to Vergil, put the drink down. "*Why?*" he demanded, "Why? Poverties? shortages? meannesses?"

Vergil laughed, slightly embarrassed. He had been obliged to acknowledge that what the Sidonian had said was true. But *why* the South Italian mode of smearing a muchness of a variety of cheap paints on doors, and of smearing it so very thin that it could have been of no use much in preserving the wood against the wear of weather and of time, at then he was not able to say. Only now did he know. Only now!

"Where is the ceremony being held this year, my don, my dan?"

"In the starry chamber, my ser proctor. Have not been there?"

Vergil paused, showed thought. "Yes. Once. My first time. I am sure I couldn't find my way there again. Someone was with me, who? you?"

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Belladuc the Rhetor had been coaching Vergil in the Encantation, shook his head the *No.* "Was not me then. Cannot be me now. My sorrow. Seek the third right corridor from the atrium where they keep the water-jars, pursue it as far as the doors are green, go a left three doors, then through the red door, and—"

So then Vergil understood. The doors of Sicily and all Italy the South had been colored as a form of code for those who could not read. The doing once done had continued of itself, and by now most often had nothing to do with what purpose of which room behind where the door. Ah, well. As a Patrician he was in the pool of those liable for selection as proctors. More: he was a Doctor in Sorcery. And being in Rome, his name was drawn for proctorship at the Encantation of the Dukos. It would take place in the starry chamber. Behind the red door. The ceremony had twice before included him, and although he had been a somewhat touched, the one taking place today would touch him a deal more.

A good deal more.

The word was *dokos* in the Greek, but almost everyone in the Latin World pronounced it *dukos;* there was something said by subtle grammarians about *o* and *u* being sister-sounds, but—Vergil neither knew nor much he cared. What he did know was that among the *dukoi* at today's ceremony, one was that of Phillip of Assyria, whom Vergil had known, unlike any of the other and earlier ones Imitated.

Had known well.

And the other *dukos* had been Imitated from his friend Quintus, the inimitable and well-beloved *Quint.* Inimitable? But . . . he had *been* imitated. He *had* been. Both Phillip and Quint were dead . . . but their dukoi lived on. A conversation heard in the Collonades of Hercules, the sun slatting in between the pillars:

". . . *Septimus . . . what?*"

". . . made a *dukos.*"

"It is death to make a *dukos.*"

"Perhaps that is why he is dead. *He* is dead. But the *dukos* is still alive."

Phillip the Assyrian. A swart, saturnine fellow. Keen of mind. No one knew better than Phillip the art of making wine-presses, olive-presses, larger mills, water-wheels, mining-drills . . . war-engines and siege machines: 'twas these two last which (it was said . . . in the Herculian Collonnade . . . Apollo's Court . . . by the Steps of Woe . . . that enclave in the Aemilian Wall . . . at all places in Yellow Rome, in fact, where folk stopped to garrulize and gossip—"What say you, my ser? Nay, but merely we exchange information. Nay, but we just—"). . . . In Phillip's native hills and mountains rich in raisins, quince, pistuquim-nuts; so one had said to Vergil, oft was Phillip heard to laugh, head a-thrown back, teeth a-gleam: in Rome? Vergil had never even seen him smile. 'Twas his great

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gift and skill at making and even alone conjecturing making, siege machines and other engines of war, which had brought Phillip beyond the gates of death. *Far beyond the gates of death, dan Vergil—!* And Vergil had bent the corners of his lips a bittle. Just *Beyond,* was quite sufficient. Was it that the King of Alpha had feared Phillip would prepare sapping-devices for the benefit of his bitter, his most bitter enemy, the King of Beta? Had it been true that Count Gamma, a Sovereign and no merely Titular Count, had hired of Phillip a set of ballistas that would have caused the walls of the castello of Baron Delta to flake like so much pastry . . . but then had not paid for them, promising payment out of future booty—What! Do you doubt that your engines will work? Doubting, then, deserve no payment; get thee gone at once!—*Did* Delta suspect that, with purses of many coins of gold, Phillip might turn his hand and coat and, after all, return to Gamma—?

Intrigue has no limits. In such intrigues even a *dukos* of the Assyrian would well fit in. Silently Vergil sighed. "The atrium where they keep the waterjars," where *was* it? This place was an enormous rabbit-warren, really, one needed a warrener as guide; and Quint?

Phillip, however often seen, met, conversed with, scanned scrolls together, even—once or twice—worked upon a work together; Phillip after all was an acquaintance. Quintus was a friend.

Quintus was a friend from earliest days and years in Rome, Quintus with his bad eyes that never got better and perhaps because Quint could not refrain from eating the prescribed ointments instead of applying them to the insides of his eyelids ("Because the salves smelled and *tasted* so good!"), Quint who languished for the purling brooks when in the purlieus of Yellow Rome and languished for the roiling streets and quick-step scenes of the Capital of the World when in the leafy quiets of the rural scenes. Who much rather roses than gold. *Pecunia non det;* and rather nuzzle the armpits of the ugliest of women than press his nose to the fairest flowers in the rosebeds of Paestum "the double-blossoming"; *who* had first put himself out to help the very youngest of aspirant-sages when new in Rome from Brundusy? Quint. And who had adventured his own life on the open sea to save Vergil's, though any true Roman detesting said sea as violating the laws of nature by unstable and infirm composition? Quint; Quintus, Quinto, tied to him by a thousand hundred cords, and even one single thread would have sufficed: *He was my closest friend and I did love him.* Why had *he* died? and who had wanted to counterfief a likeness and semblance of him and the way he moved and spoke and somewhat smiled, the merry look that hardly could it be resisted and the unmerry look that could never ever be resisted at all; who? Whose weekly letters, when they were apart were the joys of Vergil's weeks; and whose daily discourse when they saw one another day by day were the joys of Vergil's days? *Whose* mere glance told Vergil more than half a

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great chamberful of books in the Great Museum of Alexandertown? Quint's.

And now yet Quint was dead, surely he left no *larva,* no evil shade, behind him; surely to his *lar,* his goodly shade, one might offer grains of spelt and myrrh; why should some shambling and unclean reflection of a creature be suffered and endured to lurch up and down the Roman roads in Quint's own likeness, reproaching his death by its own life? *Not* to be allowed. Not.

This damned building ought not to be allowed, either. It was certainly not intended to have been builded as a labyrinth but the effect was certainly that. Formerly it had been a fortress, everyone knew that. Rounded so that enemies might have no corners behind which to hide or sneak, full of semi-secret passages even below ground-level, so that weapons, munitions, and stores might be kept in case of civil commotion or of siege; the colossal structure even had its own flora: a muckle many plants that one saw nowhere else; and legends murmured that they had first come hither in bales of fodder and of feed for cavalry and cattle. Indeed, legend, not with this content, pushed back the origin of the enormous and baffling building even farther, said that it had been built as an amphitheater and that the strange plants had come thither as feeds for the wild beasts—And now? In the filthy corridors, pomegranate rinds and stones of jujube-fruits, peelings of the orange, bitter-sweet.

"Are you here to do The Imitations of the King?" someone half-snarled half-barked at him, he knew that face with its unkempt beard and more than half-mad eyes: *Guido Porc* the man was called, a licensed warlock and an astrologue with an only semi-licet practique in sorcery: nigromanty pure (or impure!) some did not hesitate to say.

"No, I am here to do The Encantations of the *Dukos*—" but the man had with a further snarl passed on without pausing for to listen: thus he did. To put anyone off balance however slightly, to cause anyone an embarrassment however small, such things he regarded ('twould seem) as great victories, *Guido Porc.* So named, said some, for his swinish habits, his manner like a boar caught pissing; others said for his Bruté, the porpentine, or Spiney Pig: motto, *Touch me not save with care.* Vergil strongly desired to touch him not forever. And—*What?* What was this, all a-scribble and a-scrawl, taking up line after line on the scrabbled, scumbled wall, skipping many a place where the plaistering had flaked and fallen off—what was *this*—?

HIC INCLUSUS VITAM PERDIT
THE ONE SHUT UP HERE LOSES LIFE.

He had not seen it on either of his two earlier visits, perhaps he'd been careless, perhaps it was put up since. There was indeed a representation of the labyrinth, to call it a *mural* would be to describe it higher than it . . . to call it a *sketch* would be to call it by less than. . . . It was rough. Ir-

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regular. Vigorous. Unmistakable. And, unlike the average representation, it had not one "center" but also two: unlike most picturations it showed not alone the Minotaur, but his twin brother, the Tauromine: not just the man with the head of a bull, but the bull with the head of a man. Had those twain ever met outside the womb? was the instant thought in Vergil's mind, but he did not follow it—*follow it*—follow it whither?—through the maze of the labyrinth? and within, within, there walked the seus, Theseus, Theseus, sword in one hand. And in the other he held the thread supplied him as his guide by the Princess, and there stood *she,* outside the maze.

Hic quem Creaticus edit
Daedalus est Laberinthus
de quo nullus vadere
quivit qui fuit intus
ni Theseus gratis Adrianae
*stamine intus**
This that Cretan Daidalos
brings forth is the Labyrinth
from which nobody is able to
walk out who once has been in
except Theseus thanks to Ariadne
with a thread inside.

—tr. Reno W. Odlin

The inscription was a little less crude than the art; not much. Its purpose who could know. In so many cases a graffito was merely a copy. An imitation. And perhaps even this, atypical among the graffiti though it was, was, even so, an imitation; perhaps of an original seen in perhaps Delphos. Athens. On one of many of the gates of Many-Gated Thebes. Or even in Candia, the *Crete* (so some scholars said) of Magno Homero, Father of Geography and Alchemy. One never knew with a graffito. Vergil had once been told by the occymist Clemens that he Clemens had spent an entire day on his side with a wax tablet and a dim and flaring lamp a-copying long lists of the Kings of the Etruscans, alleged to be encoded forms (as well as historical catalogues) of the engrediants for a certain philosophical experiment; only to find with increasing feeling: astonished, outrageoused, and aghast: that dynasty listed the names of *Cluny, Lupo,* and *Blungjum,* all well-known local Roman professional loafers—"To *think!*" cried Clemens, blowing out his vast mostachios, "of the waste of labor on *their* part, let along on *mine,* mine, MINE!" And, he demanded, "For what purpose, did they this? For a—what? For a *jape—?*" Clemens's mind could much conceive, but a jape, not.

And now the tufa of the corridor walls were no longer the black or grey

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or brown soft stone of the outer parts of the immense building or of those with some illumination from the much-encroached-upon atrium, second- and third-hand light as it were: but now the walls were made of orange tufa, as though by this brighter hue to make the dun less dim. And, as though some unwilling awareness that, *this will not do . . . this will not do* . . . every too many paces was a torch lisping in its socket. And by the light of one such he saw, far down the hall, a group entering a room with . . . indeed . . . prophetic Sicharbus . . . a reddled door. Should Vergil have hastened his steps? For why? None had any other pressing task that could compare to any pressing task that *he* might have; and he had none. The ceremony could not commence until he were there. For whose benefit indeed, any haste or hurry? *Slowly hasten,* had said the Emperor Julius II, he so fond of nibbling on stale bread, hard cheese, little fishes; had not hesitated to slay his own babe brother, no possible claimant for a throne at any future time to leave. Slowly hastened Vergil.

The Room was several rooms away from any direct shafts of light and had a few several stands of many lamps, well-trimmed. The room had light-blue walls, the blue toned down with grey, door and framing were dull black. The ceiling was somewhat domed—concaved somewhat—and covered in darker blue and painted thickly with stars of a king's yellow, tending slightly toward a pale green: each yellow-green star with seven rays (the childish nature of the Guaramantes was nowhere better shown than by their simple belief that a star has but six rays! they have naturally made little or no progress in astrospection) and each star having the countenance of a saint: Jupiter St. Pluvius with tears running down for the sorrows of mankind and womanflesh, St. Thor Barbarossa giver of thunder and lightning the both essential for omens, Odin St. Cyclopes with one eye in the center of his brow, Thrice-great Hermes St. Mercury the messenger of good tidings, Saintly King Poseidon who rules the Realm Sea—all, and more, looked on, looked down, and it seemed that each face changed expression: cheeks moving, eyes widening or narrowing, mouths opening, closing, pursing. Rather larger than the other stars and formed in a triangulum:

Melcarth

Memnon Minrod

All twinkled, scowled, frowned, leered. None smiled.

Vergil and the magistrates exchanged salutes. It was not indeed laid down in the Pandects of Numa that any court session must begin with the judge clearing his throat, nevertheless almost always it did. The proceedings proceeded. Witnesses' ears were touched. Doctor Procopiax, the

[1] Though these warmths are not of the same degree exact, as **The Matter** doth aver.

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Chief of the Physicians, forth came and testified as to what a *dukos* was, he pronouncing it *dokos;* that the making of a *dokos* (droned old Procopiax) or *simulacrum* required sperm, spittle, flesh, skin, phlegm, at the least ane strand of hair and ane cutting of the nails of finger or/and toe—all these of the person intended to simulate or imitate—that the manner in which these elements were acquired did not affect the enterprise, that although at least one drop of the blood had must need be that of the original *mannus,* but that after that the main quantity of gore need only be of any hot-blooded beast (of bird would not do), of bullock was most commonly of use affected and that said gore must be of approximate the weight of the mannus *ipso;* and that this (drone drone) and this that (moan moan). *After* which more or less Dr. Procopiax chanted or at least sang-song, that the *primus,* the so-called Significant Tissue, rested nine months in a sealed container at the warmth between that of a man's rectum (if the speaker were of a modest not to put it prudish nature, he might say, of a man's oxter)[1] and that of a woman's privy orifice ("the which," averred the Dr. Procopiax, "is well-known to be the hotter and in time of emergency a source of publix fire"). This heat might be supplied by some fired-chamber akin to the incubatoria of the Ægyptians, but it must be kept steadily hot. *Or,* and most commonly, it might be—the place of warmth used—simply in the depths of a dung-heap, whose steady and unvarying heat was commonly known to ripen cheese and, less commonly, to be of avail in many alchemical procedures.

At the latter point of discourse Dr. Procopiax rather abruptly stopped, there was at least a whisper in the lane that a warning was issued to him, did he not, a bag might be slipped over his head. "Having exstablished the nature of a *dokos,*" said he, it seemed a good reluctantly; "we now move on to the matter of the evidence." Came forth witness who testified that the *dukoi* were in the likenesses of one Phillip of Assyria, "a subject of the Petty King of Courdistan the same being a confœderate and ally of the Roman Emperor and Empery; and of one Quinto Horatio Flacso, a Citizen of Rome—[Vergil being Proctor in this case could not testify of any knowledge known to him, *Not even under an inferior title,* as now and then rarely the Emperor did]—I say, 'of one Quinto Flacso a citizen of Rome, sometimes called 'Horry,' " thrimble thramble penis puffpaste Oh get *On* with it, Thundering Jove! thou droning dunce! perhaps by reducing emotional cases to the level of a bloody bore The Roman Law meant to prevent the spread of litigation, "sometimes called Quint," and here Vergil's head stopped its nod-nod-nodding for that day and several.

Today was the day before the Lustrum, the quincennial lustration, and all were in a hurry to get on with matters, the two cases therefor being tried as one. Witnesses came forth and pledged that may they be flayed and pegged if they had not seen and heard the very likeness of Phillip the

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Assyrian discussing the manufacture of that kind of catapult called an isadoreion and at a time when the genuine said Phillip the Assyrian was registering in Muro Luccano as being a member of a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Fingers-Mercurius the Prince of Thieves and Craftsmen. Came forth witness who swore the very same and frightful oaths and deposed that they had seen the semblance of a certain man they knew as Master Quinto leaving from an apothecaries' shop with a small pottle of a well-known eye-ointment and then in a litter gone to the home of a Roman Matron the name of whom was not to be mentioned by accord of the court and for the peace of Rome. Nor allowed query, Did he impregnate her? a-hem and yet that very day videlixet the day before and so the testimony dragged on. Many exempla could no doubt have been give. Septimus the fabricator of the *dukoi* had been questioned and had even displayed the means and the instruments of his fabrications. He had of course been tortured to get this cooperation and the fact of his next having shown the officials the details of his crime was merely another proof, no proof more being needed, of the stern and salutory effects of the torture. But then something unspeakably vile had happened. It had been intended that Septimus should of course be burned alive. By secret bribery he had gat two of the examining officials to connive at his suicide, disguised as an accidence. The truth must out, and very shortly afterward the two malefactors themselves had been, first, tortured, and then burned. Above their screams the judges and all the crowd of spectators had recited the last line of every judicial procedure: *Rome has spoken, the matter is now concluded.* At that point most of the crowd left, the games being about to start. Only a handful of boys and their pedagogues remained, the boys being obliged to get the lesson of obedience thoroughly into their small bodies as well as being punished by not seeing the herd of monoceroids attacked by slaves mounted on ponies and armed with short lances. Several of the boys sniffled and wailed at the strict punishment for having neglected their lessons, but most bore it with a stoical attention boding well for their futures.

And as well stayed some minor criminals pleased to see the judgment of those who had formerly judged them. *There is a wheel turning in the world,* Quinto Flacso had often said.

And, "*Conceive!*" he'd also said at least once, "of a world crawling with *dukoi!*" and had shuddered.

The *dukos*-Phillip was staring with a deep intent upon the chamber's floor, just so had Vergil often seen the veridical-Phillip often stare upon some pattern scratched in sand. The false Phillip next raised his head, and, half, Vergil expected to hear him say, as so often the true one had, "Eh! Messer Vergil! Let us go off and discuss the matter further over cakes and wine. Eh? Messer Vergil?" Up came false Phillip's head, but his eyes slid past Vergil's as though Vergil had not been there. What a

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broil of intrigue and small war the life of this *dukos* had for at the last two years been! Enough, the report went, for two real lifetimes.

The *dukos*-Quint? It . . . he . . . he? . . . out of some vat slime and stenk with feculent blood no *he* could have come! *It* had been facing the wall with the blank face of the sleepwalker. Of some sudden second its eyes met Vergil's . . . creature's eyes as bloodshotten as the real Quint's oft had been . . . the idiot blankness left the face. Something moved upon the mouth, the gaze fell, the gaze half-rose, fell again the gaze. Some bad movement in Vergil's belly. Something caught his collions and bade them crawl. A shudder went quickly through the proctor's hair.

"Rome has spoken," the magistrates said, less raggedly than one might have assumed considering how unfashionable any voiced unison was among the judiciary. That such "sounded false," was all their explanation. Some few of them were not past giving what might pass for verisimilitude by clearing their throats, hawking phlegms, and other nasty acts ". . . now concluded," the magistrates said, no drop in voice indicating that, indeed, this was their very last set of words. Without any formula the stage and play passed to the proctor. Vergil was his name.

He took from its place in his doeskin budget a narrow case or quiver made of white eel-skin. The case itself was sometimes used to flog the sons of Patricians not yet old enough to wear the virile toga, for the white eel, said long ago the Senate, was not an animal: therefor its skin for such an use was lawful: not so, the black. Why? Who knows why? Rome had spoken, the matter was now concluded. Vergil drew forth the slender verge of mountain-ash wood, very old it was. Quite worn.

"*Dukos and simulacrum,*" he the proctor began reciting (to read this rite was not lawful)—

"*I, Vergil Marius Mago, as Proctor in Nullification of Sorcery, exsolve and absolve thee of all rule and regula imposed by your fabricator*"; the elder of the two simulacra, the Phillip-*dukos,* stood there, slumped, of a sudden looking very weary; "and in the name of the Senate and the Populus of Rome, I offer thee the choice offered to the innocent and the inculpable: wouldst will instanta to leave all toil and pain, returning unto quiet and to dust? or wouldst rather will become the Servitor of said Senate and Populus of Rome, assuming and subsuming all rule and regula thereof? Choose now, *now* choose: *Now—*"

Said the *Dukos*-Phillip, hands clasped before, head low, "I choose to will instanta for quiet and for dust."

With but the tip of the ashwood verge, Vergil Proctor touched the *dukos* so lightly on the crown of its head. "Fecit," said Vergil. A look of utmost gratification and of peace, something like that of a man in the instant of sexual surge and release, slipped instanta over the countenance of the *Dukos*-Phillip; in the same second its whole form sank inward and outward into its robe with a sound of a sussuration and a moment the

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garment fluttered with the inflow of an ashy matter, then lay still upon the floor.

A moment's silence they gave the demise. Vergil then turned to the other. A curious small movement moved the lips of the Quinto-*dukos;* had Vergil not seen such a motion before? "*Dukos* and Simulacrum," he said. "As Proctor in Nullification of Sorcery, I exsolve and absolve thee of all rule and regula imposed by your fabricator"; *fabricator,* was that same Septimus who had kept his kip a-nigh the Steps of Woe where certain malefactors sat with the heads of animals—cow, swine, dog—a-top the shortened necks, they sat propped up holding their own severed heads in their own laps and a piece of rotten fruit clenched in teeth; "and in the names of the Senate and the Populus of Rome, I offer thee the choice offered to the innocent and the inculpable; wouldst will instanta to leave all toil and pain, returning unto quiet and to dust? or wouldst rather become the Servitor of said Senate and Populus of Rome, assuming and subsuming all rule and regula thereof? Choose now, *now* choose: *Now*—"

In that single second of silence there came again into Vergil's ears the question of the bristly lout called Guido Porc. There was a Great Mystic Doing done by the Emperor as Roman Roy and done but once a year and its ins and outs and complex pacings were more than he could do . . . sometimes. . . . Sometimes he practiced on a simulated practice-ground . . . elsewhere . . . so as not to be seen by the general. A wise king, his temper controlled beneath his feet, would practice often (Averroës: every day). A weaker one would put it often off . . . and who might protest, "Your Splendor has said *Tomorrow* for many days now?" Now and then Rumor's many tongues reported that someone of the Emperor's build with a well-made mask of the Emperor's face performed the involved and stately steps in his place; if the crops failed the next year, were the Senate and the Temples struck by lightning, if a fleet sank on a day of no storm in waters where no shoals . . . were not the Immortal Saints of Rome justly vexed? Eventually the ceremony underwent a change. . . . Someone went ahead of The King, The Emperor, The Roy, slowly pacing the steps . . . The Emperor, The King, close behind: imitated.

'Twas in the nature of things that the initiatory steps did not count, though copied. Only the imitation counted. Hence a phrase, The Imitations of the King. The King was not imitated. The King was imitating.

In the infinite swiftness of memory, Vergil now recalled discussing it with Quint once. Quint was being poor that year. They were drinking wine, Quint had poured, Vergil was sniffing and sipping, and . . . pausing, asked, quizzically, "Falernian?" "No," said Quint, "I can't afford Falernian now. It's just common wine, weak and thin, but I had it poured into the cask of the last Falernian vintage. So something of the scent and flavor of Old Falernian it has. Enough to make me remember older and happier days. . . ."

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Vergil still pausing now upon the question and the echo of his **Answer** *Now* still sounding in the ears, said the *Simulacrum*-Quint, simply, "SQPR." Senate and populus of Rome. Said Simulacrum-Quint. A well-familiar-voice. Vergil moved and touched the simulacre with the slender wooden wand, not—this time—upon the crown of the head, but on the right hand. The right hand for an instant blanched and blenched, its slight tan replaced by pallor, how black the much thin hair there. Then it flushed the dull color of deep madder, that right hand of counterfeit-Quint turned a dark dull red as of madder out of Maddergant or Maddergaunt, that Great Red She-Island that bleeds monthly into the Circumambient World-Stream, on one side the Afric Ocean and on the tother side the vast blue Indoo Sea; island eyket called Cernautis, Red Heber, Biltis-island, Island of the Rufous Ahyab, Roque-land; others. Thrawn, scrannel voice from out the night, *Sailing down the Courses of Azania . . . Come one. . . .*

The proctor gestured and the thing with its tell-tale hand gan move out, soldiers alongside it, its stance now absolutely the slight slouch of the obedient slave. Vergil saw the eyes move toward him but before glances could meet, turn away. A life of perhaps no great toil or pain lay ahead of it. Perhaps. Clerk in a warehouse of the Fisc, tutor to some public ward. Perhaps, though, there lay ahead a life of stooping beneath sacks of flour or grain in the stifling air of a State mill. Or in a Storehouse of the Gabelle, arms and legs and mouth and eyelids red, raw, crusted, scabby, stacking slabs of salt. Condemned thus by his madder-hand: *He can never pass as man more,* Vergil thought, *not with that madder-hand; never.* So ran Vergil's thought, ran right after that one, this one: *He could wear gloves. He might fee a physician for a concealing skin-paint. Perhaps find employ as a dyer.*

The *Dukos and Simulacrum* reached the black-framed door, the Soldiery were old and tired and indifferent and did not push him on; commenced to pass beneath the lintel, slightly turned his head a bit. Vergil had not stopped looking. This time, briefly, briefly, their eyes did meet. *Hic inclusus Vitam Perdit.* The one shut up here loses life. *Ni Theseus gratis Adriane stamine intus.* Except Theseus thanks to Ariadne with a thread inside. What? *What?* But *how* escape, to do these things? was Vergil's question. Pseudo-Quinto, with a slight compression of his lips, turned again his head, seemed somehow to have given a slight nod, satisfied. And *I would help, is* **how,** was Vergil's answer. Not-quite-Quint passed through the door.

Rome has spoken, the matter is concluded.

Is it, then?

In another and more common version of the eternally familiar labyrinthal line, *the thread held by Ariadne.* The proctor had three names. None of them was Ariadne. But it was he who held the thread. ●

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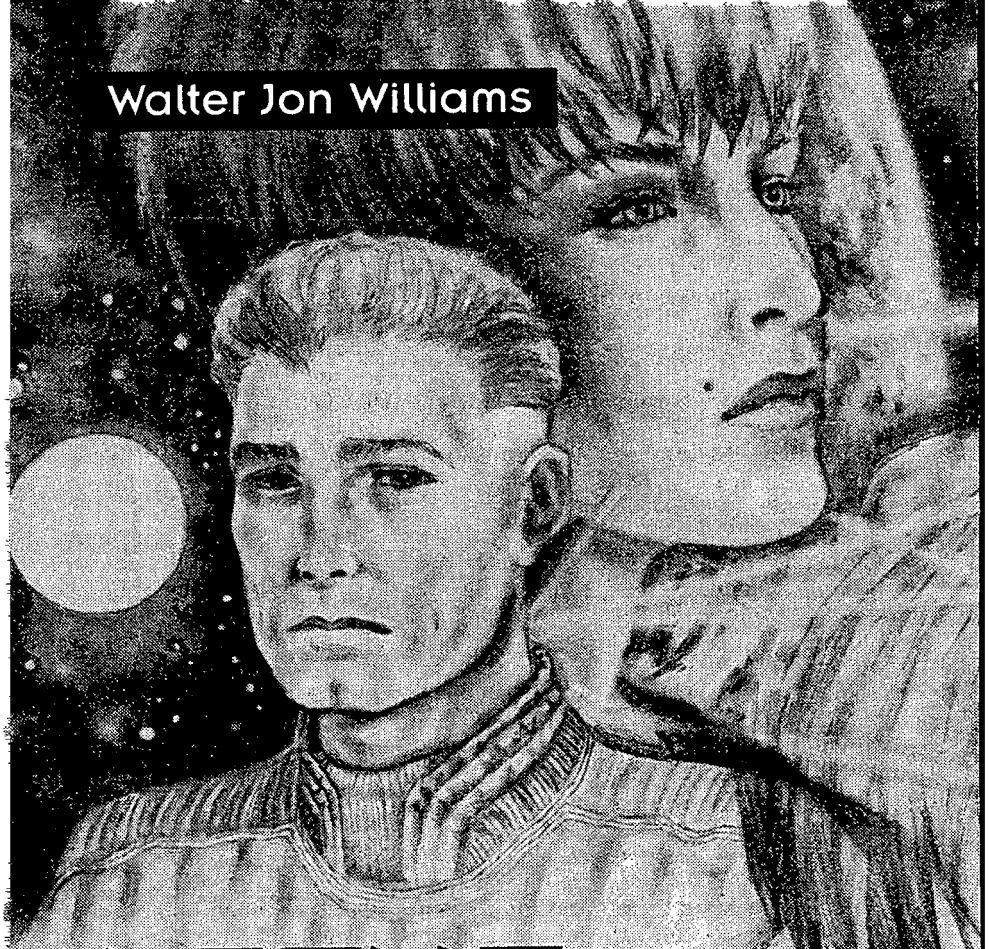
Walter Jon Williams



LETHE

In a future where entire worlds can be shaped and people can be cloned at will, one man discovers just how hard it is to re-create that which is truly precious. Walter Jon Williams's most recent novel is the critically acclaimed *City on Fire* (HarperPrism 1997). He is currently at work on his next book, *The Rift*.

Illustration by Dell Harris

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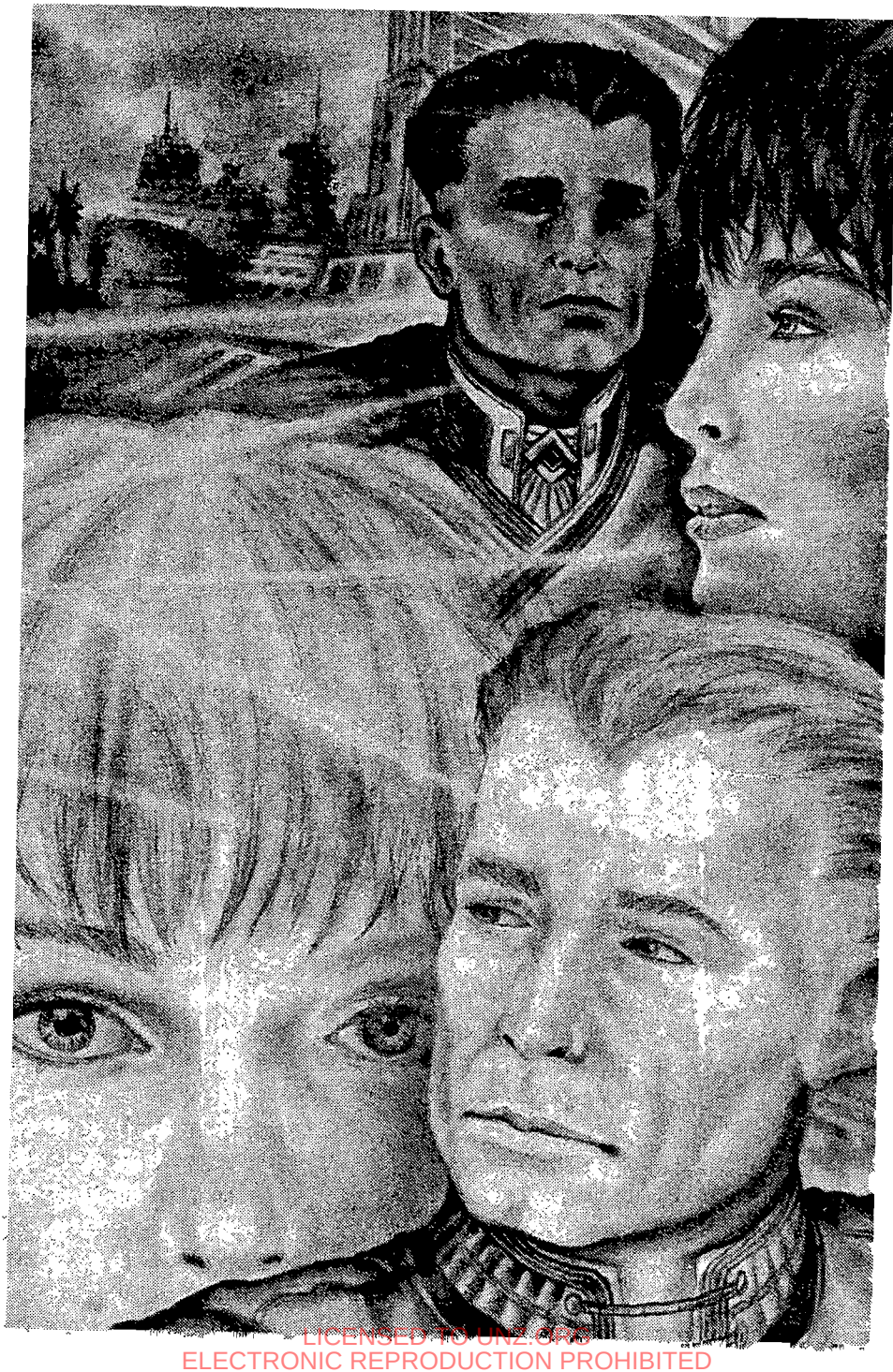

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Davout had himself disassembled for the return journey. He had already been torn in half, he felt: the remainder, the dumb beast still alive, did not matter. The captain had ruled, and Katrin would not be brought back. Davout did not want to spend the years between the stars in pain, confronting the gaping absence in his quarters, surrounded by the quiet sympathy of the crew.

Besides, he was no longer needed. The terraforming team had done its work, and then, but for Davout, had died.

Davout lay down on a bed of nano and let the little machines take him apart piece by piece, turn his body, his mind, and his unquenchable longing into long strings of numbers. The nanomachines crawled into his brain first, mapping, recording, and then shut down his mind piece by piece, so that he would feel no discomfort during what followed, or suffer a memory of his own body being taken apart.

Davout hoped that the nanos would shut down the pain before his consciousness failed, so that he could remember what it was like to live without the anguish that was now a part of his life, but it didn't work out that way. When his consciousness ebbed, he was aware, even to the last fading of the light, of the knife-blade of loss still buried in his heart.

The pain was there when Davout awoke, a wailing voice that cried, a pure contralto keen of agony, in his first dawning awareness. He found himself in an early-Victorian bedroom, blue-striped wallpaper, silhouettes in oval frames, silk flowers in vases. Crisp sheets, light streaming in the window. A stranger—shoulder-length hair, black frock coat, cravat carelessly tied—looked at him from a gothic-revival armchair. The man held a pipe in the right hand and tamped down tobacco with the prehensile big toe of his left foot.

"I'm not on the *Beagle*," Davout said.

The man gave a grave nod. His left hand formed the mudra for <correct>. "Yes."

"And this isn't a virtual?"

<Correct> again. "No."

"Then something has gone wrong."

<Correct> "Yes. A moment, sir, if you please." The man finished tamping, slipped his foot into a waiting boot, then lit the pipe with the anachronistic lighter in his left hand. He puffed, drew in smoke, exhaled, put the lighter in his pocket, and settled back in the walnut embrace of his chair.

"I am Dr. Li," he said. <Stand by> said the left hand, the old finger position for a now-obsolete palmtop computer, a finger position that had once meant *pause*, as <correct> had once meant *enter*, enter because it was correct. "Please remain in bed for a few more minutes while the nanos doublecheck their work. Redundancy is frustrating," puffing smoke, "but good for peace of mind."

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"What happens if they find they've made a mistake?"

<Don't be concerned.> "It can't be a very large mistake," said Li, "or we wouldn't be communicating so rationally. At worst, you will sleep for a bit while things are corrected."

"May I take my hands out from under the covers?" he asked.

"Yes."

Davout did so. His hands, he observed, were brown and leathery, hands suitable for the hot, dry world of Sarpedon. They had not, then, changed his body for one more suited to Earth, but given him something familiar.

If, he realized, they were on Earth.

His right fingers made the mudra <thank you>.

<Don't mention it> signed Li.

Davout passed a hand over his forehead, discovered that the forehead, hand, and the gesture itself were perfectly familiar.

Strange, but the gesture convinced him that he was, in a vital way, still himself. Still Davout.

Still alive, he thought. Alas.

"Tell me what happened," he said. "Tell me why I'm here."

Li signed <stand by>, made a visible effort to collect himself. "We believe," he said, "that the *Beagle* was destroyed. If so, you are the only survivor."

Davout found his shock curiously veiled. The loss of the other lives—friends, most of them—stood muted by the precedent of his own earlier, overriding grief. It was as if the two losses were weighed in a balance, and the *Beagle* found wanting.

Li, Davout observed, was waiting for Davout to absorb this information before continuing.

<Go on> Davout signed.

"The accident happened seven light-years out," Li said. "*Beagle* began to yaw wildly, and both automatic systems and the crew failed to correct the maneuver. *Beagle*'s automatic systems concluded that the ship was unlikely to survive the increasing oscillations, and began to use its communications lasers to download personality data to collectors in Earth orbit. As the only crew member to elect disassembly during the return journey, you were first in the queue. The others, we presume, ran to nano disassembly stations, but communication was lost with the *Beagle* before we retrieved any of their data."

"Did Katrin's come through?"

Li stirred uneasily in his chair. <Regrettably> "I'm afraid not."

Davout closed his eyes. He had lost her again. Over the bubble of hopelessness in his throat he asked, "How long has it been since my data arrived?"

"A little over eight days."

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They had waited eight days, then, for *Beagle*—for the *Beagle* of seven years ago—to correct its problem and reestablish communication. If *Beagle* had resumed contact, the mass of data that was Davout might have been erased as redundant.

"The government has announced the loss," Li said. "Though there is a remote chance that the *Beagle* may come flying in or through the system in eleven years as scheduled, we have detected no more transmissions, and we've been unable to observe any blueshifted deceleration torch aimed at our system. The government decided that it would be unfair to keep sibs and survivors in the dark any longer."

<Concur> Davout signed.

He envisioned the last moments of the *Beagle*, the crew being flung back and forth as the ship slammed through increasing pendulum swings, the desperate attempts, fighting wildly fluctuating gravity and inertia, to reach the emergency nanobeds . . . no panic, Davout thought, Captain Moshweshwe had trained his people too well for that. Just desperation, and determination, and, as the oscillations grew worse, an increasing sense of futility, and impending death.

No one expected to die anymore. It was always a shock when it happened near you. Or *to* you.

"The cause of the *Beagle*'s problem remains unknown," Li said, the voice far away. "The Bureau is working with simulators to try to discover what happened."

Davout leaned back against his pillow. Pain throbbed in his veins, pain and loss, knowledge that his past, his joy, was irrecoverable. "The whole voyage," he said, "was a catastrophe."

<I respectfully contradict> Li signed. "You terraformed and explored two worlds," he said. "Downloads are already living on these worlds, hundreds of thousands now, millions later. There would have been a third world added to our commonwealth if your mission had not been cut short due to the, ah, first accident . . ."

<Concur> Davout signed, but only because his words would have come out with too much bitterness.

<Sorry>, a curt jerk of Li's fingers. "There are messages from your sibs," Li said, "and downloads from them also. The sibs and friends of *Beagle*'s crew will try to contact you, no doubt. You need not answer any of these messages until you're ready."

<Understood.>

Davout hesitated, but the words were insistent; he gave them tongue. "Have Katrin's sibs sent messages?" he asked.

Li's grave expression scarcely changed. "I believe so." He tilted his head. "Is there anything I can do for you? Anything I can arrange?"

"Not now, no," said Davout. <Thank you> he signed. "Can I move from the bed now?"

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Li's look turned abstract as he scanned indicators projected somewhere in his mind. <Yes> "You may," he said. He rose from his chair, took the pipe from his mouth. "You are in a hospital, I should add," he said, "but you do not have the formal status of patient, and may leave at any time. Likewise, you may stay here for the foreseeable future, as long as you feel it necessary."

<Thank you> "Where is this hospital, by the way?"

"West Java. The city of Bandung."

Earth, then. Which Davout had not seen in seventy-seven years. Memory's gentle fingers touched his mind with the scent of durian, of ocean, of mace, cloves, and turmeric.

He knew he had never been in Java before, though, and wondered whence the memory came. From one of his sibs, perhaps?

<Thank you> Davout signed again, putting a touch of finality, a kind of dismissal, into the twist of his fingers.

Dr. Li left Davout alone, in his new/old body, in the room that whispered of memory and pain.

In a dark wood armoire, Davout found identification and clothing, and a record confirming that his account had received seventy-eight years' back pay. His electronic inbox contained downloads from his sibs and more personal messages than he could cope with—he would have to construct an electronic personality to answer most of them.

He dressed and left the hospital. Whoever supervised his reassembly—Dr. Li perhaps—had thoughtfully included a complete Earth atlas in his internal ROM, and he accessed it as he walked, making random turnings but never getting lost. The furious sun burned down with tropical intensity, but his current body was constructed to bear heat, and a breeze off the mountains made pleasant even the blazing noontide.

The joyful metal music of the *gamelans* clattered from almost every doorway. People in bright clothing, agile as the siamang of near Sumatra, sped overhead along treeways and ropeways, arms and hands modified for brachiation. Robots, immune to the heat, shimmered past on silent tires. Davout found it all strangely familiar, as if he had been here in a dream.

And then he found himself by the sea, and a pang of familiarity knifed through his heart. *Home!* cried his thoughts. Other worlds he had built, other beauties he had seen, but he had never beheld *this* blue, *this* perfection, anywhere else but on his native sphere. Subtle differences in atmospherics had rendered this color unnatural on any other world.

And with the cry of familiarity came a memory: it had been Davout the Silent who had come here, a century or more ago, and Katrin had been by his side.

But Davout's Katrin was dead. And as he looked on Earth's beauty, he felt his world of joy turn to bitter ashes.

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<Alas!> His fingers formed the word unbidden. <Alas!>

He lived in a world where no one died, and nothing was ever lost. One understood that such things occasionally occurred, but never—hardly ever—to anyone that one knew. Physical immortality was cheap and easy, and was supported by so many alternate systems: backing up the mind by downloading, or downloading into a virtual reality system or into a durable machine. Nanosystems duplicated the body or improved it, adapted it for different environments. Data slumbered in secure storage, awaiting the electron kiss that returned it to life. Bringing a child to term in the womb was now the rarest form of reproduction, and bringing a child to life in a machine womb the next rarest.

It was so much easier to have the nanos duplicate you as an adult. Then, at least, you had someone to talk to.

No one died, and nothing was ever lost. But Katrin died, Davout thought, and now I am lost, and it was not supposed to be this way.

<Alas!> Fingers wailed the grief that was stopped up in Davout's throat. <Alas!>

Davout and Katrin had met in school, members of the last generation in which womb-breeding outnumbered the alternatives. Immortality whispered its covenant into their receptive ears. On their first meeting, attending a lecture (Dolphus on "Reinventing the Humboldt Sea") at the College of Mystery, they looked at each other and *knew,* as if angels had whispered into their ears, that there was now one less mystery in the world, that each served as an answer to another, that each fitted neatly into a hollow that the other had perceived in his or her soul, dropping into place as neatly as a butter-smooth piece in a finely made teak puzzle—or, considering their interests, as easily as a carbolic functional group nested into place on an indole ring.

Their rapport was, they freely admitted, miraculous. Still young, they exploded into the world, into a universe that welcomed them.

He could not bear to be away from her. Twenty-four hours was the absolute limit before Davout's nerves began to beat a frustrated little tattoo, and he found himself conjuring a phantom Katrin in his imagination, just to have someone to share the world with—he *needed* her there, needed this human lens through which he viewed the universe.

Without her, Davout found the cosmos veiled in a kind of uncertainty. While it was possible to apprehend certain things (the usefulness of a coenocytic arrangement of cells in the transmission of information-bearing proteins and nuclei, the historical significance of the Yucatan astrobleme, the limitations of the Benard cell model in predicting thermic instabilities in the atmosphere), these things lacked *nóesis,* existed only as a series of singular, purposeless accidents. Reflected through Katrin, however, the world took on brilliance, purpose, and genius. With Katrin he could feast upon the universe; without her the world lacked savor.

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Their interests were similar enough for each to generate enthusiasm in the other, diverse enough that each was able to add perspective to the other's work. They worked in cozy harmony, back to back, two desks set in the same room. Sometimes Davout would return from a meeting, or a coffee break, and find that Katrin had added new paragraphs, sometimes an entire new direction, to his latest effort. On occasion he would return the favor. Their early work—eccentric, proliferating in too many directions, toward too many specialties—showed life and promise and more than a hint of brilliance.

Too much, they decided, for just the two of them. They wanted to do too much, and all at once, and an immortal lifetime was not time enough.

And so, as soon as they could afford it, Red Katrin, the original, was duplicated—with a few cosmetic alterations—in Dark Katrin and later Katrin the Fair; and nanomachines read Old Davout, blood and bone and the long strands of numbers that were his soul, and created perfect copies in Dangerous Davout, later called the Conqueror, and Davout the Silent.

Two had become six, and half a dozen, they now agreed, was about all the universe could handle for the present. The wild tangle of overlapping interests was parceled out between the three couples, each taking one of the three most noble paths to understanding. The eldest couple chose History as their domain, a part of which involved chronicling the adventures of their sibs; the second couple took Science; the third Psyche, the exploration of the human mind. Any developments, any insights, on the part of one of the sibs could be shared with the others through downloads. In the beginning they downloaded themselves almost continually, sharing their thoughts and experiences and plans in a creative frenzy. Later, as separate lives and more specialized careers developed, the downloads grew less frequent, though there were no interruptions until Dangerous Davout and Dark Katrin took their first voyage to another star. They spent over fifty years away, though to them it was less than thirty; and the downloads from Earth, pulsed over immense distances by communications lasers, were less frequent, and less frequently resorted to. The lives of the other couples, lived at what seemed speeded-up rates, were of decreasing relevance to their own existence, as if they were lives that dwelled in a half-remembered dream.

<Alas!> the fingers signed. <Alas!> for the dream turned to savage nightmare.

The sea, a perfect terrestrial blue, gazed back into Davout's eyes, indifferent to the sadness frozen into his fingers.

"Your doctors knew that to wake here, after such an absence, would result in a feeling of anachronism," said Davout's sib, "so they put you in this Victorian room, where you would at least feel at ease with the kind of anachronism by which you are surrounded." He smiled at Davout from

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the neo-gothic armchair. "If you were in a modern room, you might experience a sensation of obsolescence. But everyone can feel superior to the Victorians, and besides, one is always more comfortable in one's past."

"Is one?" Davout asked, fingers signing <irony>. The past and the present, he found, were alike a place of torment.

"I discover," he continued, "that my thoughts stray for comfort not to the past, but to the future."

"Ah." A smile. "That is why we call you Davout the Conqueror."

"I do not seem to inhabit that name," Davout said, "if I ever did."

Concern shadowed the face of Davout's sib. <Sorry> he signed, and then made another sign for <profoundly>, the old *multiply* sign, multiples of sorrow in his gesture.

"I understand," he said. "I experienced your last download. It was . . . intensely disturbing. I have never felt such terror, such loss."

"Nor had I," said Davout.

It was Old Davout whose image was projected into the gothic-revival armchair, the original, womb-born Davout of whom the two sibs were copies. When Davout looked at him it was like looking into a mirror in which his reflection had been retarded for several centuries, then unexpectedly released—Davout remembered, several bodies back, once possessing that tall forehead, the fair hair, the small ears flattened close to the skull. The grey eyes he had still, but he could never picture himself wearing the professorial little goatee.

"How is our other sib?" Davout asked.

The concern on Old Davout's face deepened. "You will find Silent Davout much changed. You haven't uploaded him, then?"

<No> "Due to the delays, I'm thirty years behind on my uploading."

"Ah." <Regret> "Perhaps you should speak to him, then, before you upload all those years."

"I will." He looked at his sib and hoped the longing did not burn in his eyes. "Please give my best to Katrin, will you?"

"I will give her your *love*," said Old Davout, wisest of the sibs.

The pain was there when Davout awoke next day, fresh as the moment it first knifed through him, on the day their fifth child, the planet Sarpedon, was christened. Sarpedon had been discovered by astronomers a couple of centuries before, and named, with due regard for tradition, after yet another minor character in Homer; it had been mapped and analyzed by robot probes; but it had been the *Beagle*'s terraforming team that had made the windswept place, with its barren mountain ranges and endless deserts, its angry radiation and furious dust storms, into a place suitable for life.

Katrin was the head of the terraforming team. Davout led its research division. Between them, raining nano from Sarpedon's black skies, they

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nursed the planet to life, enriched its atmosphere, filled its seas, crafted tough, versatile vegetation capable of withstanding the angry environment. Seeded life by the tens of millions, insects, reptiles, birds, mammals, fish, and amphibians. Re-created themselves, with dark, leathery skin and slit pupils, as human forms suitable for Sarpedon's environment, so that they could examine the place they had built.

And—unknown to the others—Davout and Katrin had slipped bits of their own genetics into almost every Sarpedan life-form. Bits of redundant coding, mostly, but enough so that they could claim Sarpedon's entire world of creatures as their children. Even when they were junior terraformers on the *Cheng Ho*'s mission to Rhea, they had, partly as a joke, partly as something more calculated, populated their creations with their genes.

Katrin and Davout spent the last two years of their project on Sarpedon among their children, examining the different ecosystems, different interactions, tinkering with new adaptations. In the end, Sarpedon was certified as suitable for human habitation. Preprogrammed nanos constructed small towns, laid out fields, parks, and roads. The first human Sarpedans would be constructed in nanobeds, and their minds filled with the downloaded personalities of volunteers from Earth. There was no need to go to the expense and trouble of shipping out millions of warm bodies from Earth, running the risks of traveling for decades in remote space. Not when nanos could construct them all new on site.

The first Sarpedans—bald, leather-skinned, slit-eyed—emerged blinking into their new red dawn. Any further terraforming, any attempts to fine-tune the planet and make it more Earthlike, would be a long-term project and up to them. In a splendid ceremony, Captain Moshweshwe formally turned the future of Sarpedon over to its new inhabitants. Davout had a few last formalities to perform, handing certain computer codes and protocols over to the Sarpedans, but the rest of the terraforming team, most fairly drunk on champagne, filed into the shuttle for the return journey to the *Beagle*. As Davout bent over a terminal with his Sarpedan colleagues and the *Beagle*'s first officer, he could hear the roar of the shuttle on its pad, the sustained thunder as it climbed for orbit, the thud as it crashed through the sound barrier, and then he saw out of the corner of his eye the sudden red-gold flare . . .

When he raced outside, it was to see the blazing poppy unfolding in the sky, a blossom of fire and metal falling slowly to the surface of the newly christened planet.

There she was—her image anyway—in the neo-gothic armchair: Red Katrin, the green-eyed lady with whom he in memory, and Old Davout in reality, had first exchanged glances two centuries ago while Dolphus expanded on what he called his "lunaforming."

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Davout had hesitated about returning her call of condolence. He did not know whether his heart could sustain *two* knife-thrusts, both Katrin's death and the sight of her sib, alive, sympathetic, and forever beyond his reach.

But he couldn't *not* call her. Even when he was trying not to think about her, he still found Katrin on the edge of his perceptions, drifting though his thoughts like the persistent trace of some familiar perfume.

Time to get it over with, he thought. If it was more than he could stand, he could apologize and end the call. But he had to *know* . . .

"And there are no backups?" she said. A pensive frown touched her lips.

"No *recent* backups," Davout said. "We always thought that, if we were to die, we would die together. Space travel is hazardous, after all, and when catastrophe strikes it is not a *small* catastrophe. We didn't anticipate one of us surviving on Earth, and the other dying light-years away." He scowled.

"Damn Mosheshwe anyway! There were recent backups on the *Beagle*, but with so many dead from an undetermined cause, he decided not to resurrect anyone, to cancel our trip to Astoreth, return to Earth, and sort out all the complications once he got home."

"He made the right decision," Katrin said. "If my sib had been resurrected, you both would have died together."

<Better so> Davout's fingers began to form the mudra, but he thought better of it, made a gesture of negation.

The green eyes narrowed. "There are older backups on Earth, yes?"

"Katrin's latest surviving backup dates from the return of the *Cheng Ho*."

"Almost ninety years ago." Thoughtfully. "But she could upload the memories she has been sending me . . . the problem does not seem insurmountable."

Red Katrin clasped her hands around one knee. At the familiar gesture, memories rang through Davout's mind like change-bells. Vertigo overwhelmed him, and he closed his eyes.

"The problem is the instructions Katrin—we both—left," he said. "Again, we anticipated that if we died, we'd die together. And so we left instructions that our backups on Earth were not to be employed. We reasoned that we had two sibs apiece on Earth, and if they—you—missed us, you could simply duplicate yourselves."

"I see." A pause, then concern. "Are you all right?"

<No> "Of course not," he said. He opened his eyes. The world eddied for a moment, then stilled, the growing calmness centered on Red Katrin's green eyes.

"I've got seventy-odd years' back pay," he said. "I suppose that I could hire some lawyers, try to get Katrin's backup released to my custody."

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Red Katrin bit her nether lip. "Recent court decisions are not in your favor."

"I'm very persistent. And I'm cash-rich."

She cocked her head, looked at him. "Are you all right talking to me? Should I blank my image?"

<No.> He shook his head. "It helps, actually, to see you."

He had feared agony in seeing her, but instead he found a growing joy, a happiness that mounted in his heart. As always, his Katrin was helping him to understand, helping him to make sense of the bitter confusion of the world.

An idea began to creep into his mind on stealthy feet.

"I worry that you're alone there," Red Katrin said. "Would you like to come stay with us? Would you like us to come to Java?"

<No, thanks> "I'll come see you soon," Davout said. "But while I'm in the hospital, I think I'll have a few cosmetic procedures." He looked down at himself, spread his leathery hands. "Perhaps I should look a little more Earthlike."

After his talk with Katrin ended, Davout called Dr. Li and told him that he wanted a new body constructed.

Something familiar, he said, already in the files. His own, original form.

Age twenty or so.

"It is a surprise to see you . . . as you are," said Silent Davout.

Deep-voiced, black-skinned, and somber, Davout's sib stood by his bed.

"It was a useful body when I wore it," Davout answered. "I take comfort in . . . familiar things . . . now that my life is so uncertain." He looked up. "It was good of you to come in person."

"A holographic body," he said, taking Davout's hand, "however welcome, however familiar, is not the same as a real person."

Davout squeezed the hand. "Welcome, then," he said. Dr. Li, who had supervised in person through the new/old body's assembly, had left after saying the nanos were done, so it seemed appropriate for Davout to stand and embrace his sib.

The youngest of the sibs was not tall, but he was built solidly, as if for permanence, and his head seemed slightly oversized for his body. With his older sibs, he had always maintained a kind of formal reserve that had resulted in his being nicknamed "the Silent." Accepting the name, he remarked that the reason he spoke little when the others were around was that his older sibs had already said everything that needed saying before he got to it.

Davout stepped back and smiled. "Your patients must think you a tower of strength."

"I have no patients these days. Mostly I work in the realm of theory."

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"I will have to look up your work. I'm so far behind on uploads—I don't have any idea what you and Katrin have been doing these last decades."

Silent Davout stepped to the armoire and opened its ponderous mahogany doors. "Perhaps you should put on some clothing," he said. "I am feeling chill in this conditioned air, and so must you."

Amused, Davout clothed himself, then sat across the little rosewood side table from his sib. Davout the Silent looked at him for a long moment—eyes placid and thoughtful—and then spoke.

"You are experiencing something that is very rare in our time," he said. "Loss, anger, frustration, terror. All the emotions that in their totality equal *grief*."

"You forgot sadness and regret," Davout said. "You forgot memory, and how the memories keep replaying. You forgot *imagination*, and how imagination only makes those memories worse, because imagination allows you to write a different ending, but the world will not."

Silent Davout nodded. "People in my profession," fingers forming <irony>, "anyway those born too late to remember how common these things once were, must view you with a certain clinical interest. I must commend Dr. Li on his restraint."

"Dr. Li is a shrink?" Davout asked.

<Yes.> A casual press of fingers. "Among other things. I'm sure he's watching you very carefully and making little notes every time he leaves the room."

"I'm happy to be useful." <Irony> in his hand, bitterness on his tongue. "I would give those people my memories, if they want them so much."

<Of course> "You can do that."

Davout looked up in something like surprise.

"You know it is possible," his sib said. "You can download your memories, preserve them like amber or simply hand them to someone else to experience. And you can erase them from your mind completely, walk on into a new life, *tabula rasa* and free of pain."

His deep voice was soft. It was a voice without affect, one he no doubt used on his patients, quietly insistent without being officious. A voice that made suggestions, or presented alternatives, but which never, ever, gave orders.

"I don't want that," Davout said.

Silent Davout's fingers were still set in <of course>. "You are not of the generation that accepts such things as a matter of course," he said. "But this, this *modular* approach to memory, to being, constitutes much of my work these days."

Davout looked at him. "It must be like losing a piece of yourself, to give up a memory. Memories are what make you."

Silent Davout's face remained impassive as his deep voice sounded through the void between them. "What forms a human psyche is not a

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memory, we have come to believe, but a pattern of thought. When our sib duplicated himself, he duplicated his pattern in us; and when we assembled new bodies to live in, the pattern did not change. Have you felt yourself to be a different person when you took a new body?"

Davout passed a hand over his head, felt the fine blond hair covering his scalp. This time yesterday, his head had been bald and leathery. Now he felt subtle differences in his perceptions—his vision was more acute, his hearing less so—and his muscle memory was somewhat askew. He remembered having a shorter reach, a slightly different center of gravity.

But as for *himself*, his essence—no, he felt himself unchanged. He was still Davout.

<No> he signed.

"People have more choices than ever before," said Silent Davout. "They choose their bodies, they choose their memories. They can upload new knowledge, new skills. If they feel a lack of confidence, or feel that their behavior is too impulsive, they can tweak their body chemistry to produce a different effect. If they find themselves the victim of an unfortunate or destructive compulsion, the compulsion can be edited from their being. If they lack the power to change their circumstances, they can at least elect to feel happier about them. If a memory cannot be overcome, it can be eliminated."

"And you now spend your time dealing with these problems?" Davout asked.

"They are not *problems*," his sib said gently. "They are not *syndromes* or *neuroses*. They are *circumstances*. They are part of the condition of life as it exists today. They are environmental." The large, impassive eyes gazed steadily at Davout. "People choose happiness over sorrow, fulfillment over frustration. Can you blame them?"

<Yes> Davout signed. "If they deny the evidence of their own lives," he said. "We define our existence by the challenges we overcome, or those we don't. Even our tragedies define us."

His sib nodded. "That is an admirable philosophy—for Davout the Conqueror. But not all people are conquerors."

Davout strove to keep the impatience from his voice. "Lessons are learned from failures as well as successes. Experience is gained, life's knowledge is applied to subsequent occurrence. If we deny the uses of experience, what is there to make us human?"

His sib was patient. "Sometimes the experiences are negative, and so are the lessons. Would you have a person live forever under the shadow of great guilt, say for a foolish mistake that resulted in injury or death to someone else; or would you have them live with the consequences of damage inflicted by a sociopath, or an abusive family member? Traumas like these can cripple the whole being. Why should the damage not be repaired?"

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Davout smiled thinly. "You can't tell me that these techniques are used only in cases of deep trauma," he said. "You can't tell me that people aren't using these techniques for reasons that might be deemed trivial. Editing out a foolish remark made at a party, or eliminating a bad vacation or an argument with the spouse."

Silent Davout returned his smile. "I would not insult your intelligence by suggesting these things do not happen."

<Q.E.D.> Davout signed. "So how do such people mature? Change? Grow in wisdom?"

"They cannot edit out *everything*. There is sufficient friction and conflict in the course of ordinary life to provide everyone with their allotted portion of wisdom. Nowadays our lives are very, very long, and we have a long time to learn, however slowly. And after all," he said, smiling, "the average person's capacity for wisdom has never been so large as all *that!* I think you will find that as a species we are far less prone to folly than we once were."

Davout looked at his sib grimly. "You are suggesting that I undergo this technique?"

"It is called Lethe."

"That I undergo Lethe? Forget Katrin? Or forget what I feel for her?"

Silent Davout slowly shook his grave head. "I make no such suggestion."

"Good."

The youngest Davout gazed steadily into the eyes of his older twin. "Only you know what you can bear. I merely point out that this remedy exists, should you find your anguish beyond what you can endure."

"Katrin deserves mourning," Davout said.

Another grave nod. "Yes."

"She deserves to be remembered. Who will remember her if I do not?"

"I understand," said Silent Davout. "I understand your desire to feel, and the necessity. I only mention Lethe because I comprehend all too well what you endure now. Because"—he licked his lips—"I, too, have lost Katrin."

Davout gaped at him. "You—" he stammered. "She is—she was killed?"

<No.> His sib's face retained its remarkable placidity. "She left me, sixteen years ago."

Davout could only stare. The fact, stated so plainly, was incomprehensible.

"I—" he began, and then his fingers found another thought. <What happened?>

"We were together for a century and a half. We grew apart. It happens."

Not to us it doesn't! Davout's mind protested. *Not to Davout and Katrin!*

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Not to the two people who make up a whole greater than its parts. Not to *us*. Not ever.

But looking into his sib's accepting, melancholy face, Davout knew that it had to be true.

And then, in a way he knew to be utterly disloyal, he began to hope.

"Shocking?" said Old Davout. "Not to us, I suppose."

"It was their downloads," said Red Katrin. "Fair Katrin in particular was careful to edit out some of her feelings and judgments before she let me upload them, but still I could see her attitudes changing. And knowing her, I could make guesses by what she left out . . . I remember telling Davout three years before the split that the relationship was in jeopardy."

"The Silent One was still surprised, though, when it happened," Old Davout said. "Sophisticated though he may be about human nature, he had a blind spot where Katrin was concerned." He put an arm around Red Katrin and kissed her cheek. "As I suppose we all do," he added.

Katrin accepted the kiss with a gracious inclination of her head, then asked Davout, "Would you like the blue room here, or the green room upstairs? The green room has a window seat and a fine view of the bay, but it's small."

"I'll take the green room," Davout said. I do not need so much room, he thought, now that I am alone.

Katrin took him up the creaking wooden stair and showed him the room, the narrow bed of the old house. Through the window, he could look south to a storm on Chesapeake Bay, bluegray cloud, bright eruptions of lightning, slanting beams of sunlight that dropped through rents in the storm to tease bright winking light from the foam. He watched it for a long moment, then was startled out of reverie by Katrin's hand on his shoulder, and a soft voice in his ear.

"Are there sights like this on other worlds?"

"The storms on Rhea were vast," Davout said, "like nothing on this world. The ocean area is greater than that on Earth, and lies mostly in the tropics—the planet was almost called Oceanus on that account. The hurricanes built up around the equatorial belts with nothing to stop them, sometimes more than a thousand kilometers across, and they came roaring into the temperate zones like multi-armed demons, sometimes one after another for months. They spawned waterspots and cyclones in their vanguard, inundated whole areas with a storm surge the size of a small ocean, dumped enough rain to flood an entire province away. . . . We thought seriously that the storms might make life on land untenable."

He went on to explain the solution he and Katrin had devised for the enormous problem: huge strings of tall, rocky barrier islands built at a furious rate by nanomachines, a wall for wind and storm surge to break

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against; a species of silvery, tropical floating weed, a flowery girdle about Rhea's thick waist, that radically increased surface albedo, reflecting more heat back into space. Many species of deep-rooted, vinelike plants to anchor slopes and prevent erosion, other species of thirsty trees, adaptations of cottonwoods and willows, to line streambeds and break the power of flash floods.

Planetary engineering on such an enormous scale, in such a short time, had never been attempted, not even on Mars, and it had been difficult for Katrin and Davout to sell the project to the project managers on the *Cheng Ho*. Their superiors had initially preferred a different approach, huge equatorial solar curtains deployed in orbit to reflect heat, squadrons of orbital beam weapons to blast and disperse storms as they formed, secure underground dwellings for the inhabitants, complex lock and canal systems to control flooding . . . Katrin and Davout had argued for a more elegant approach to Rhea's problems, a reliance on organic systems to modify the planet's extreme weather instead of assaulting Rhea with macro-tech and engineering. Theirs was the approach that finally won the support of the majority of the terraforming team, and resulted in their subsequent appointment as heads of *Beagle*'s terraforming team.

"Dark Katrin's memories were very exciting to upload during that time," said Katrin the Red. "That delirious explosion of creativity! Watching a whole globe take shape beneath her feet!" Her green eyes look up into Davout's. "We were jealous of you then. All that abundance being created, all that talent going to shaping an entire world. And we were confined to scholarship, which seemed so lifeless by comparison."

He looked at her. <Query> "Are you sorry for the choice you made? You two were senior: you could have chosen our path if you'd wished. You still could, come to that."

A smile drifts across her face. "You tempt me, truly. But Old Davout and I are happy in our work—and besides, you and Katrin needed someone to provide a proper record of your adventures." She tilted her head, and mischief glittered in her eyes. "Perhaps you should ask Blonde Katrin. Maybe she could use a change."

Davout gave a guilty start: she was, he thought, seeing too near, too soon. "Do you think so?" he asked. "I didn't even know if I should see her."

"Her grudge is with the Silent One, not with you."

"Well." He managed a smile. "Perhaps I will at least call."

Davout called Katrin the Fair, received an offer of dinner on the following day, accepted. From his room, he followed the smell of coffee into his hosts' office, and felt a bubble of grief lodge in his heart: two desks, back-to-back, two computer terminals, layers of papers and books and

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printout and dust . . . he could imagine himself and Katrin here, sipping coffee, working in pleasant compatibility.

<How goes it?> he signed.

His sib looked up. "I just sent a chapter to Sheol," he said. "I was making *Maxwell* far too wise." He fingered his little goatee. "The temptation is always to view the past solely as a vehicle that leads to our present grandeur. These people's sole function was to produce *us*, who are of course perfectly wise and noble and far superior to our ancestors. So one assumes that these people had *us* in mind all along, that we were what they were working toward. I have to keep reminding myself that these people lived amid unimaginable tragedy, disease and ignorance and superstition, vile little wars, terrible poverty, and *death* . . ."

He stopped, suddenly aware that he'd said something awkward—Davout felt the word vibrate in his bones, as if he were stranded inside a bell that was still singing after it had been struck—but he said, "Go on."

"I remind myself," his sib continued, "that the fact that we live in a modern culture doesn't make us better, it doesn't make us superior to these people—in fact it enlarges *them*, because they had to overcome so much more than we in order to realize themselves, in order to accomplish as much as they did." A shy smile drifted across his face. "And so a rather smug chapter is wiped out of digital existence."

"*Lavoisier* is looming," commented Red Katrin from her machine.

"Yes, that too," Old Davout agreed. His *Lavoisier and his Age* had won the McEldowney Prize and been shortlisted for other awards. Davout could well imagine that bringing *Maxwell* up to *Lavoisier*'s magisterial standards would be intimidating.

Red Katrin leaned back in her chair, combed her hair back with her fingers. "I made a few notes about the *Beagle* project," she said. "I have other commitments to deal with first, of course."

She and Old Davout had avoided any conflicts of interest and interpretation by conveniently dividing history between them: she would write of the "modern" world and her near-contemporaries, while he wrote of those securely in the past. Davout thought his sib had the advantage in this arrangement, because her subjects, as time progressed, gradually entered his domain, and became liable to his reinterpretation.

Davout cleared away some printout, sat on the edge of Red Katrin's desk. "A thought keeps bothering me," he said. "In our civilization we record everything. But the last moments of the crew of the *Beagle* went unrecorded. Does that mean they do not exist? Never existed at all? That death was *always* their state, and they returned to it, like virtual matter dying into the vacuum from which it came?"

Concern darkened Red Katrin's eyes. "They will be remembered," she said. "I will see to it."

"Katrin didn't download the last months, did she?"

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<No> "The last eight months were never sent. She was very busy, and—"

"Virtual months, then. Gone back to the phantom zone."

"There are records. Other crew sent downloads home, and I will see if I can gain access either to the downloads, or to their friends and relations who have experienced them. There is *your* memory, your downloads."

He looked at her. "Will you upload my memory, then? My sib has everything in his files, I'm sure." Glancing at Old Davout.

She pressed her lips together. "That would be difficult for me. *Me* viewing *you* viewing *her*. . . ." She shook her head. "I don't dare. Not now. Not when we're all still in shock."

Disappointment gnawed at his insides with sharp rodent teeth. He did not want to be so alone in his grief; he didn't want to nourish all the sadness by himself.

He wanted to share it with *Katrin,* he knew, the person with whom he shared everything. Katrin could help him make sense of it, the way she clarified all the world for him. Katrin would comprehend the way he felt.

<I understand> he signed. His frustration must have been plain to Red Katrin, because she took his hand, lifted her green eyes to his.

"I will," she said. "But not now. I'm not ready."

"I don't want *two* wrecks in the house," called Old Davout over his shoulder.

Interfering old bastard, Davout thought. But with his free hand he signed, again, <I understand>.

Katrin the Fair kissed Davout's cheek, then stood back, holding his hands, and narrowed her grey eyes. "I'm not sure I approve of this youthful body of yours," she said. "You haven't looked like this in—what—over a century?"

"Perhaps I seek to evoke happier times," Davout said.

A little frown touched the corners of her mouth. "*That* is always dangerous," she judged. "But I wish you every success." She stepped back from the door, flung out an arm. "Please come in."

She lived in a small apartment in Toulouse, with a view of the Allée Saint-Michel and the rose-red brick of the Vieux Quartier. On the whitewashed walls hung terra-cotta icons of Usil and Tiv, the Etruscan gods of the sun and moon, and a well cover with a figure of the demon Charun emerging from the underworld. The Etruscan deities were confronted, on another wall, by a bronze figure of the Gaulish Rosmerta, consort of the absent Mercurius.

Her little balcony was bedecked with wrought iron and a gay striped awning. In front of the balcony a table shimmered under a red-and-white checked tablecloth: crystal, porcelain, a wicker basket of bread, a bottle of wine. Cooking scents floated in from the kitchen.

"It smells wonderful," Davout said.

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<Drink?> Lifting the bottle.

<Why not?>

Wine was poured. They settled onto the sofa, chatted of weather, crowds, Java. Davout's memories of the trip that Silent Davout and his Katrin had taken to the island were more recent than hers.

Fair Katrin took his hand. "I have uploaded Dark Katrin's memories, so far as I have them," she said. "She loved you, you know—absolutely, deeply." <Truth.> She bit her lip. "It was a remarkable thing."

<Truth> Davout answered. He touched cool crystal to his lips, took a careful sip of his cabernet. Pain throbbed in the hollows of his heart.

"Yes," he said. "I know."

"I felt I should tell you about her feelings. Particularly in view of what happened with me and the Silent One."

He looked at her. "I confess I do not understand that business."

She made a little frown of distaste. "We and our work and our situation grew irksome. Oppressive. You may upload his memories if you like—I daresay you will be able to observe the signs that he was determined to ignore."

<I am sorry.>

Clouds gathered in her grey eyes. "I, too, have regrets."

"There is no chance of reconciliation?"

<Absolutely not>, accompanied by a brief shake of the head. "It was over." <Finished> "And, in any case, Davout the Silent is not the man he was."

<Yes?>

"He took Lethe. It was the only way he had of getting over my leaving him."

Pure amazement throbbed in Davout's soul. Fair Katrin looked at him in surprise.

"You didn't know?"

He blinked at her. "I *should* have. But I thought he was talking about *me*, about a way of getting over . . ." Aching sadness brimmed in his throat. "Over the way my Dark Katrin left me."

Scorn whitened the flesh about Fair Katrin's nostrils. "That's the Silent One for you. He didn't have the nerve to tell you outright."

"I'm not sure that's true. He may have thought he was speaking plainly enough—"

Her fingers formed a mudra that gave vent to a brand of disdain that did not translate into words. "He knows his effects perfectly well," she said. "He was trying to suggest the idea without making it clear that this was his *choice* for you, that he wanted you to fall in line with his theories."

Anger was clear in her voice. She rose, stalked angrily to the bronze of Rosmerta, adjusted its place on the wall by a millimeter or so. Turned, waved an arm.

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<Apologies>, flung to the air. "Let's eat. Silent Davout is the last person I want to talk about right now."

"I'm sorry I upset you." Davout was not sorry at all: he found this display fascinating. The gestures, the tone of voice, were utterly familiar, ringing like chimes in his heart; but the *style,* the way Fair Katrin avoided the issue, was different. Dark Katrin never would have fled a subject this way: she would have knit her brows and confronted the problem direct, engaged with it until she'd either reached understanding or catastrophe. Either way, she'd have laughed, and tossed her dark hair, and announced that now she understood.

"It's peasant cooking," Katrin the Fair said as she bustled to the kitchen, "which of course is the best kind."

The main course was a ragoût of veal in a velouté sauce, beans cooked simply in butter and garlic, tossed salad, bread. Davout waited until it was half consumed, and the bottle of wine mostly gone, before he dared to speak again of his sib.

"You mentioned the Silent One and his theories," he said. "I'm thirty years behind on his downloads, and I haven't read his latest work—what is he up to? What's all this theorizing about?"

She sighed, fingers ringing a frustrated rhythm on her glass. Looked out the window for a moment, then conceded. "Has he mentioned the modular theory of the psyche?"

Davout tried to remember. "He said something about modular *memory,* I seem to recall."

<Yes> "That's a part of it. It's a fairly radical theory that states that people should edit their personality and abilities at will, as circumstances dictate. That one morning, say, if you're going to work, you upload appropriate memories, and work skills, along with a dose of ambition, of resolution, and some appropriate emotions like satisfaction and eagerness to solve problems, or endure drudgery, as the case may be."

Davout looked at his plate. "Like cookery, then," he said. "Like this dish—veal, carrots, onions, celery, mushrooms, parsley."

Fair Katrin made a mudra that Davout didn't recognize. <Sorry?> he signed.

"Oh. Apologies. That one means, roughly, 'har-de-har-har.' " Fingers formed <laughter>, then <sarcasm>, then slurred them together. "See?"

<Understood.> He poured more wine into her glass.

She leaned forward across her plate. "Recipes are fine if one wants to be *consumed,*" she said. "Survival is another matter. The human mind is more than just ingredients to be tossed together. The atomistic view of the psyche is simplistic, dangerous, and *wrong.* You cannot *will* a psyche to be whole, no matter how many *wholeness* modules are uploaded. A psyche is more than the sum of its parts."

Wine and agitation burnished her cheeks. Conviction blazed from her

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eyes. "It takes *time* to integrate new experience, new abilities. The modular theorists claim this will be done by a 'conductor,' an artificial intelligence that will be able to judge between alternate personalities and abilities and upload whatever's needed. But that's such *rubbish*, I—" She looked at the knife she was waving, then permitted it to return to the table.

"How far are the Silent One and his cohorts toward realizing this ambition?" Davout said.

<Beg pardon?> She looked at him. "I didn't make that clear?" she said. "The technology is already here. It's happening. People are fragmenting their psyches deliberately and trusting to their conductors to make sense of it all. And they're *happy* with their choices, because that's the only emotion they permit themselves to upload from their supply." She clenched her teeth, glanced angrily out the window at the Vieux Quartier's sunset-burnished walls. "All traditional psychology is aimed at integration, at wholeness. And now it's all to be *thrown away*. . . ." She flung her hand out the window. Davout's eyes automatically followed an invisible object on its arc from her fingers toward the street.

"And how does this theory work in practice?" Davout asked. "Are the streets filled with psychological wrecks?"

Bitterness twisted her lips. "Psychological imbeciles, more like. Executing their conductors' orders, docile as well-fed children, happy as clams. They upload passions—anger, grief, loss—as artificial experiences, secondhand from someone else, usually so they can tell their conductor to avoid such emotions in the future. They are not *people* any more, they're . . ." Her eyes turned to Davout.

"You saw the Silent One," she said. "Would you call him a *person?*"

"I was with him for only a day," Davout said. "I noticed something of a . . ." <Stand by> he signed, searching for the word.

"Lack of affect?" she interposed. "A demeanor marked by an extreme placidity?"

<Truth> he signed.

"When it was clear I wouldn't come back to him, he wrote me out of his memory," Fair Katrin said. "He replaced the memories with *facts*—he knows he was married to me, he knows we went to such-and-such a place or wrote such-and-such a paper—but there's nothing else there. No feelings, no real memories good or bad, no understanding, nothing left from almost two centuries together." Tears glittered in her eyes. "I'd rather he felt anything at all—I'd rather he hated me than feel this apathy!"

Davout reached across the little table and took her hand. "It is his decision," he said, "and his loss."

"It is *all* our loss," she said. Reflected sunset flavored her tears with the color of roses. "The man we loved is gone. And millions are gone with him—millions of little half-alive souls, programmed for happiness and

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unconcern." She tipped the bottle into her glass, received only a sluicing of dregs.

"Let's have another," she said.

When he left, some hours later, he embraced her, kissed her, let his lips linger on hers for perhaps an extra half-second. She blinked up at him in wine-muddled surprise, and then he took his leave.

"How did you find my sib?" Red Katrin asked.

"Unhappy," Davout said. "Confused. Lonely, I think. Living in a little apartment like a cell, with icons and memories."

<I know> she signed, and turned on him a knowing green-eyed look.

"Are you planning on taking her away from all that? To the stars, perhaps?"

Davout's surprise was brief. He looked away and murmured, "I didn't know I was so transparent."

A smile touched her lips. <Apologies> she signed. "I've lived with Old Davout for nearly two hundred years. You and he haven't grown so very far apart in that time. My fair sib deserves happiness, and so do you . . . if you can provide it, so much the better. But I wonder if you are not moving too fast, if you have thought it all out."

Moving fast, Davout wondered. His life seemed so very slow now, a creeping dance with agony, each move a lifetime.

He glanced out at Chesapeake Bay, saw his second perfect sunset in only a few hours—the same sunset he'd watched from Fair Katrin's apartment, now radiating its red glories on the other side of the Atlantic. A few water-skaters sped toward home on their silver blades. He sat with Red Katrin on a porch swing, looking down the long green sward to the bayfront, the old wooden pier, and the sparkling water, that profound, deep blue that sang of home to Davout's soul. Red Katrin wrapped herself against the breeze in a fringed, autumn-colored shawl. Davout sipped coffee from gold-rimmed porcelain, set the cup into its saucer.

"I wondered if I was being untrue to *my* Katrin," he said. "But they are really the same person, aren't they? If I were to pursue some other woman now, I would know I was committing a betrayal. But how can I betray Katrin with herself?"

An uncertain look crossed Red Katrin's face. "I've downloaded them both," she said hesitantly, "and I'm not certain that the Dark and Fair Katrins are quite the same person. Or ever were."

Not the same—of course he knew that. Fair Katrin was not a perfect copy of her older sib—she had flaws, clear enough. She had been damaged, somehow. But the flaws could be worked on, the damage repaired. Conquered. There was infinite time. He would see it done.

<Question> "And how do your sibs differ, then?" he asked. "Other than obvious differences in condition and profession?"

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She drew her legs up and rested her chin on her knees. Her green eyes were pensive. "Matters of love," she said, "and happiness."

And further she would not say.

Davout took Fair Katrin to Tangier for the afternoon and walked with her up on the old palace walls. Below them, white in the sun, the curved mole built by Charles II cleaved the Middle Sea, a thin crescent moon laid upon the perfect shimmering azure. (Home! home!, the waters cried.) The sea breeze lashed her blonde hair across her face, snapped little sonic booms from the sleeves of his shirt.

"I have sampled some of the Silent One's downloads," Davout said. "I wished to discover the nature of this artificial tranquility with which he has endowed himself."

Fair Katrin's lips twisted in distaste, and her fingers formed a scatologue.

"It was . . . interesting," Davout said. "There was a strange, uncomplicated quality of bliss to it. I remember experiencing the download of a master sitting zazen once, and it was an experience of a similar cast."

"It may have been the exact same sensation." Sourly. "He may have just copied the Zen master's experience and slotted it into his brain. That's how *most* of the vampires do it—award themselves the joy they haven't earned."

"That's a Calvinistic point of view," Davout offered. "That happiness can't just happen, that it has to be earned."

She frowned out at the sea. "There is a difference between real experience and artificial or recapitulative experience. If that's Calvinist, so be it."

<Yes> Davout signed. "Call me a Calvinist sympathizer, then. I have been enough places, done enough things, so that it matters to me that I was actually there and not living out some programmed dream of life on other worlds. I've experienced my sibs' downloads—lived significant parts of their lives, moment by moment—but it is not the same as *my life,* as *being me.* I am," he said, leaning elbows on the palace wall, "I am myself, I am the sum of everything that happened to me, I stand on this wall, I am watching this sea, I am watching it with you, and no one else has had this experience, nor ever shall, it is *ours,* it belongs to *us* . . ."

She looked up at him, straw-hair flying over an unreadable expression. "Davout the Conqueror," she said.

<No> he signed. "I did not conquer alone."

She nodded, holding his eyes for a long moment. "Yes," she said. "I know."

He took Katrin the Fair in his arms and kissed her. There was a moment's stiff surprise, and then she began to laugh, helpless peals bursting against his lips. He held her for a moment, too surprised to react, and

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then she broke free. She reeled along the wall, leaning for support against the old stones. Davout followed, babbling, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

She leaned back against the wall. Words burst half-hysterical from her lips, in between bursts of desperate, unamused laughter. "So *that's* what you were after! My God! As if I hadn't had enough of you all after all these years!"

"I apologize," Davout said. "Let's forget this happened. I'll take you home."

She looked up at him, the laughter gone, blazing anger in its place. "The Silent One and I would have been all right if it hadn't been for you—*for our sibs!*" She flung her words like daggers, her voice breaking with passion. "You lot were the eldest, you'd already parceled out the world between you. You were only interested in psychology because my damned Red sib and your Old one wanted insight into the characters in their histories, and because you and your dark bitch wanted a theory of the psyche to aid you in building communities on other worlds. We only got created because *you were too damned lazy to do your own research!*"

Davout stood, stunned. <No> he signed, "That's not—"

"We were *third,*" she cried. "We were *born in third place.* We got the jobs you wanted *least,* and while you older sibs were winning fame and glory, we were stuck in work that didn't suit, that you'd *cast off,* awarded to us as if we were charity cases—" She stepped closer, and Davout was amazed to find a white-knuckled fist being shaken in his face. "My husband was called The Silent because his sibs had already used up all the words! He was third-rate and *knew* it! It *destroyed* him! Now he's plugging artificial satisfaction into his head because it's the only way he'll ever feel it."

"If you didn't like your life," Davout said, "you could have changed it. People start over all the time—we'd have helped." He reached toward her. "I can help you to the stars, if that's what you want."

She backed away. "The only help we ever needed was to *get rid of you!*" A mudra, <har-de-har-har>, echoed the sarcastic laughter on Fair Katrin's lips. "And now there's another gap in your life, and you want me to fill it—*not this time.*"

<*Never*> her fingers echoed. <*Never.*> The laughter bubbled from her throat again.

She fled, leaving him alone and dazed on the palace wall, as the booming wind mocked his feeble protests.

"I am truly sorry," Red Katrin said. She leaned close to him on the porch swing, touched soft lips to his cheek. "Even though she edited her downloads, I could tell she resented us—but I truly did not know how she would react."

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Davout was frantic. He could feel Katrin slipping farther and farther away, as if she were on the edge of a precipice and her handholds were crumbling away beneath her clawed fingers.

"Is what she said true?" he asked. "Have we been slighting them all these years? Using them, as she claims?"

"Perhaps she had some justification once," Red Katrin said. "I do not remember anything of the sort when we were young, when I was uploading Fair Katrin almost every day. But now . . ." Her expression grew severe. "These are mature people, not without resources or intelligence—I can't help but think that surely after a person is a century old, any problems that remain are *her* fault."

As he rocked on the porch swing he could feel a wildness rising in him. *My God,* he thought, *I am going to be* alone.

His brief days of hope were gone. He stared out at the bay—the choppy water was too rough for any but the most dedicated water-skaters—and felt the pain pressing on his brain, like the two thumbs of a practiced sadist digging into the back of his skull.

"I wonder," he said. "Have you given any further thought to uploading my memories?"

She looked at him curiously. "It's scarcely time yet."

"I feel a need to share . . . some things."

"Old Davout has uploaded them. You could speak to him."

This perfectly intelligent suggestion only made him clench his teeth. He needed *sense* made of things, he needed things put in *order,* and that was not the job of his sib. Old Davout would only confirm what he already knew.

"I'll talk to him, then," he said.

And then never did.

The pain was worst at night. It wasn't the sleeping alone, or merely Katrin's absence: it was the knowledge that she would *always* be absent, that the empty space next to him would be there forever. It was then that the horror fully struck him, and he would lie awake for hours, eyes staring into the terrible void that wrapped him in its dark cloak, while fits of trembling sped through his limbs.

I will go mad, he sometimes thought. It seemed something he could choose, as if he were a character in an Elizabethan drama who turns to the audience to announce that he will be mad now, and then in the next scene is found gnawing bones dug out of the family sepulcher. Davout could see himself being found outside, running on all fours and barking at the stars.

And then, as dawn crept across the windowsill, he would look out the window and realize, to his sorrow, that he was not yet mad, that he was condemned to another day of sanity, of pain, and of grief.

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Then, one night, he *did* go mad. He found himself squatting on the floor in his nightshirt, the room a ruin around him: mirrors smashed, furniture broken. Blood was running down his forearms.

The door leapt off its hinges with a heave of Old Davout's shoulder. Davout realized, in a vague way, that his sib had been trying to get in for some time. He saw Red Katrin's silhouette in the door, an aureate halo around her auburn hair in the instant before Old Davout snapped on the light.

Afterward Katrin pulled the bits of broken mirror out of Davout's hands, washed and disinfected them, while his sib tried to reconstruct the green room and its antique furniture.

Davout watched his spatters of blood stain the water, threads of scarlet whirling in coreolis spirals. "I'm sorry," he said. "I think I may be losing my mind."

"I doubt that." Frowning at a bit of glass in her tweezers.

"I want to *know*."

Something in his voice made her look up. "Yes?"

He could see his staring reflection in her green eyes. "Read my downloads. Please. I want to know if . . . I'm reacting normally in all this. If I'm lucid or just . . ." He fell silent. *Do it,* he thought. *Just do this one thing.*

"I don't upload other people. Davout can do that. *Old* Davout, I mean."

No, Davout thought. His sib would understand all too well what he was up to.

"But he's me!" he said. "He'd think I'm normal!"

"Silent Davout, then. Crazy people are his specialty."

Davout wanted to make a mudra of scorn, but Red Katrin held his hands captive. Instead he gave a laugh. "He'd want me to take Lethe. Any advice he gave would be . . . in that direction." He made a fist of one hand, saw drops of blood well up through the cuts. "I need to know if I can stand this," he said. "If—something drastic is required."

She nodded, looked again at the sharp little spear of glass, put it deliberately on the edge of the porcelain. Her eyes narrowed in thought—Davout felt his heart vault at that look, at the familiar lines forming at the corner of Red Katrin's right eye, each one known and adored.

Please do it, he thought desperately.

"If it's that important to you," she said, "I will."

"Thank you," he said.

He bent his head over her and the basin, raised her hand, and pressed his lips to the flesh beaded with water and streaked with blood.

It was almost like conducting an affair, all clandestine meetings and whispered arrangements. Red Katrin did not want Old Davout to know she was uploading his sib's memories—"I would just as soon not deal with his disapproval"—and so she and Davout had to wait until he was

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gone for a few hours, a trip to record a lecture for Cavor's series on *Ideas and Manners*.

She settled onto the settee in the front room and covered herself with her fringed shawl. Closed her eyes. Let Davout's memories roll through her.

He sat in a chair nearby, his mouth dry. Though nearly thirty years had passed since Dark Katrin's death, he had experienced only a few weeks of that time; and Red Katrin was floating through these memories at speed, tasting here and there, skipping redundancies or moments that seemed inconsequential . . .

He tried to guess from her face where in his life she dwelt. The expression of shock and horror near the start was clear enough, the shuttle bursting into flames. After the shock faded, he recognized the discomfort that came with experiencing a strange mind, and flickering across her face came expressions of grief, anger, and here and there amusement; but gradually there was only a growing sadness, and lashes wet with tears. He crossed the room to kneel by her chair and take her hand. Her fingers pressed his in response . . . she took a breath, rolled her head away . . . he wanted to weep not for his grief, but for hers.

The eyes fluttered open. She shook her head. "I had to stop," she said. "I couldn't take it—" She looked at him, a kind of awe in her wide green eyes. "My God, the sadness! And the *need*. I had no idea. I've never felt such need. I wonder what it is to be needed that way."

He kissed her hand, her damp cheek. Her arms went around him. He felt a leap of joy, of clarity. The need was hers, now.

Davout carried her to the bed she shared with his sib, and together they worshipped memories of his Katrin.

"I will take you there," Davout said. His finger reached into the night sky, counted stars, *one, two, three*. . . . "The planet's called Atugan. It's boiling hot, nothing but rock and desert, sulphur and slag. But we can make it home for ourselves and our children—all the species of children we desire, fish and fowl." A bubble of happiness filled his heart. "Dinosaurs, if you like," he said. "Would you like to be parent to a dinosaur?"

He felt Katrin leave the shelter of his arm, step toward the moonlit bay. Waves rumbled under the old wooden pier. "I'm not trained for terraforming," she said. "I'd be useless on such a trip."

"I'm decades behind in my own field," Davout said. "You could learn while I caught up. You'll have Dark Katrin's downloads to help. It's all possible."

She turned toward him. The lights of the house glowed yellow off her pale face, off her swift fingers as she signed.

<Regret> "I have lived with Old Davout for near two centuries," she said.

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His life, for a moment, seemed to skip off its internal track; he felt himself suspended, poised at the top of an arc just before the fall.

Her eyes brooded up at the house, where Old Davout paced and sipped coffee and pondered his life of Maxwell. The mudras at her fingertips were unreadable in the dark.

"I will do as I did before," she said. "I cannot go with you, but my other self will."

Davout felt his life resume. "Yes," he said, because he was in shadow and could not sign. "By all means." He stepped nearer to her. "I would rather it be you," he whispered.

He saw wry amusement touch the corners of her mouth. "It *will* be me," she said. She stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek. "But now I am your sister again, yes?" Her eyes looked level into his. "Be patient. I will arrange it."

"I will in all things obey you, madam," he said, and felt wild hope singing in his heart.

Davout was present at her awakening, and her hand was in his as she opened her violet eyes, the eyes of his Dark Katrin. She looked at him in perfect comprehension, lifted a hand to her black hair; and then the eyes turned to the pair standing behind him, to Old Davout and Red Katrin.

"Young man," Davout said, putting his hand on Davout's shoulder, "allow me to present you to my wife." And then (wisest of the sibs), he bent over and whispered, a bit pointedly, into Davout's ear, "I trust you will do the same for me, one day."

Davout concluded, through his surprise, that the secret of a marriage that lasts two hundred years is knowing when to turn a blind eye.

"I confess I am somewhat envious," Red Katrin said as she and Old Davout took their leave. "I envy my twin her new life."

"It's your life as well," he said. "She *is* you." But she looked at him soberly, and her fingers formed a mudra he could not read.

He took her on honeymoon to the Rockies, used some of his seventy-eight years' back pay to rent a sprawling cabin in a high valley above the headwaters of the Rio Grande, where the wind rolled grandly through the pines, hawks spun lazy high circles on the afternoon thermals, and the brilliant clear light blazed on white starflowers and Indian paintbrush. They went on long walks in the high hills, cooked simply in the cramped kitchen, slept beneath scratchy trade blankets, made love on crisp cotton sheets.

He arranged an office there, two desks and two chairs, back-to-back. Katrin applied herself to learning biology, ecology, nanotech, and quantum physics—she already had a good grounding, but a specialist's knowledge was lacking. Davout tutored her, and worked hard at catching up with the latest developments in the field. She—they did not have a name

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for her yet, though Davout thought of her as "New Katrin"—would review Dark Katrin's old downloads, concentrating on her work, the way she visualized a problem.

Once, opening her eyes after an upload, she looked at Davout and shook her head. "It's strange," she said. "It's *me,* I know it's me, but the way she *thinks*—" <I don't understand> she signed. "It's not memories that make us, we're told, but patterns of thought. We are who we are because we think using certain patterns . . . but I do not seem to think like her at all."

"It's habit," Davout said. "Your habit is to think a different way."

<Possibly> she conceded, brows knit.

<Truth> "You—Red Katrin—uploaded Dark Katrin before. You had no difficulty in understanding her then."

"I did not concentrate on the technical aspects of her work, on the way she visualized and solved problems. They were beyond my skill to interpret—I paid more attention to other moments in her life." She lifted her eyes to Davout. "Her moments with you, for instance. Which were very rich, and very intense, and which sometimes made me jealous."

"No need for jealousy now."

<Perhaps> she signed, but her dark eyes were thoughtful, and she turned away.

He felt Katrin's silence after that, an absence that seemed to fill the cabin with the invisible, weighty cloud of her somber thought. Katrin spent her time studying by herself or restlessly paging through Dark Katrin's downloads. At meals and in bed, she was quiet, meditative—perfectly friendly, and, he thought, not unhappy—but keeping her thoughts to herself.

She is adjusting, he thought. *It is not an easy thing for someone two centuries old to change.*

"I have realized," she said ten days later at breakfast, "that my sib—that Red Katrin—is a coward. That I am created—and the other sibs, too—to do what she would not, or dared not." Her violet eyes gazed levelly at Davout. "She wanted to go with you to Atugan, she wanted to feel the power of your desire . . . but something held her back. So I am created to do the job for her. It is my purpose . . . to fulfill *her* purpose."

"It's her loss, then," Davout said, though his fingers signed <surprise>.

<Alas!> she signed, and Davout felt a shiver caress his spine. "But I am a coward, too!" Katrin cried. "I am *not* your brave Dark Katrin, and I cannot become her!"

"Katrin," he said. "You are the same person—you *all* are!"

She shook her head. "I do not think like your Katrin. I do not have her courage. I do not know what liberated her from her fear, but it is something I do not have. And—" She reached across the table to clasp his hand. "I do not have the feelings for you that she possessed. I simply do

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not. I have tried, I have had that world-eating passion read into my mind, and I compare it with what I feel, and—what I have is as nothing. I *wish* I felt as she did, I truly do. But if I love anyone, it is Old Davout. And . . ." She let go his hand, and rose from the table. "I am a coward, and I will take the coward's way out. I must leave."

<No> his fingers formed, then <please>. "You can change that," he said. He followed her into the bedroom. "It's just a switch in your mind, Silent Davout can throw it for you, we can love each other forever. . . ." She made no answer. As she began to pack, grief seized him by the throat and the words dried up. He retreated to the little kitchen, sat at the table, held his head in his hands. He looked up when she paused in the door, and froze like a deer in the violet light of her eyes.

"Fair Katrin was right," she said. "Our elder sibs are bastards—they use us, and not kindly."

A few moments later he heard a car drive up, then leave. <Alas!> his fingers signed. <Alas!>

He spent the day unable to leave the cabin, unable to work, terror shivering through him. After dark, he was driven outside by the realization that he would have to sleep on sheets that were touched with Katrin's scent. He wandered by starlight across the high mountain meadow, dry soil crunching beneath his boots, and when his legs began to ache he sat down heavily in the dust.

"*I am weary of my groaning. . . .*" he thought.

It was summer, but the high mountains were chill at night, and the deep cold soaked his thoughts. The word *Lethe* floated through his mind. Who would not choose to be happy? he asked himself. It is a switch in your mind, and someone can throw it for you.

He felt the slow, aching droplets of mourning being squeezed from his heart, one after the other, and wondered how long he could endure them, the relentless moments, each striking with the impact of a hammer, each a stunning, percussive blow. . . .

Throw a switch, he thought, and the hammerblows would end.

"Katrin deserves mourning," he had told Davout the Silent, and now he had so many more Katrins to mourn, Dark Katrin and Katrin the Fair, Katrin the New and Katrin the Old. All the Katrins webbed by fate, alive or dead or merely enduring. And so he would, from necessity, endure. . . . *So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

He lay on his back, on the cold ground, gazed up at the world of stars, and tried to find the worlds, among the glittering teardrops of the heavens, where he and Katrin had rained from the sky their millions of children. ●

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Blissfully Adrift on an Ocean of Stories

Recent fertile months have sprouted a rich crop of single-author collections, normally a rare commodity. Let us enjoy!

Stepan Chapman is a name you must get to know. If you like the work of Don Webb or R.A. Lafferty, John Sladek or Alasdair Gray, you'll revel in Chapman's romps. *Danger Music* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, chapbook, $2.99, 40 pages) consists of ten "fables," metafictional gems that never in their cleverness lose sight of emotional verities. "Scheherazarr" and "The Prison of Sod" movingly explore the plight of creative souls. "The God of Dollars" and "The Sick Ox and the Stairways of Causation" play with Latin American motifs in a magical-realist way. And "The Sister City" sorrowfully mourns the same tragic ground as John Shirley's *City Come A-Walkin'* (1980). Humor-packed and plangent with sirensong, this sampler of Chapman's work is a true bargain.

Those of us who think of Brian Stableford only as an expert teller of SF tales and as an erudite critic will be surprised by his *Fables & Fantasies* (Necronomicon Press, chapbook, $4.95, 30 pages). Here is Stableford mining a Dunsanian vein, turning out perfect little prose poems that hew to a Clark Ashton Smith credo. As names of dire deities repeat from story to story, a true universe of terror, laughter, and folly is constructed. My favorite piece is "The Annual Conference of the Prophets of Atlantis," which manages to satirize shortsightedness in general and SF writers in particular! Evocative illustrations by the Dark Prince of Ink, Joey Zone, contribute to the eerie flavor.

The Book of Lost Places (Dark Regions Press, trade, $8.95, 116 pages) assembles nine stories by Jeff VanderMeer, two of which—"Mahout" and "The Bone Carver's Tale"—will be familiar to *Asimov's* audience. All the rest are up to the high standards of these two. VanderMeer's piercing astral eye flits through time and space—from Depression-era New Orleans to WWII London, to name only a couple of coordinates—spying on various deeply observed characters. Some pieces ("Falling into the Arms of Death He Found a Beautiful Place" and "The Ministry of Butterflies") compare favorably with Lucius Shepard's tales of Latin America; others ("The Sea, Mendeho, and Moonlight" and "Greensleeves") recall classic Bradbury. As Mark Rich says in his introduc-

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tion, VanderMeer is a writer for whom words are "our most valued possessions."

If you enjoyed last year's *Civil-WarLand in Bad Decline* by George Saunders, or any of the work of Scott Bradfield, you'll want to pick up *Way Below E* (White Pine Press, trade, $14.00, 230 pages) by Patrick Murphy. Murphy has set up fictional shop in that neighborhood where average folks, holding onto their mundane lives only timorously, find themselves doing awful things under the press of unusual circumstances. What is truly alarming, however, is that these folks usually end up *enjoying* their personal Armageddons, which provide all the excitement lacking in their old existence. The title story charts the all-too-plausible devolution of a serial killer; it shares a mood with "Tiger," whose narrator stops short (perhaps) at a single murder. "Corners" is a brief glimpse of an Orwellian nightmare. "The Glass Harmonica" is pleasantly loopy for a change, detailing the quest of its narrator for a unique musical experience; allied in goofy spirit is "Cubing the Course," where eccentricity becomes a positive survival tactic. Most awesome of all is "Heading Toward Zero," which perfectly illuminates its opening sentence: "Jonas J. Smythe had just closed a deal on a sweet, red '88 Ford when the first trump signalling the beginning of the ending of the world sounded."

Murphy's style reminds me a bit of William Browning Spencer's, only starker. And like Spencer, he proves that terror and mystery are best found behind the drawn shades of your neighbors.

Where is Michael Blumlein these days? I miss seeing new stories by him, and am only slightly placated by the appearance in mass-market form of his Scream/Press collection from 1990, *The Brains of Rats* (Dell, $5.50, 197 pages). Mind you, it's only the superior quality of the stories herein that both soothe and provoke my greed. The two most notorious—"The Brains of Rats" and "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case Report"—show Blumlein in an MD mode that's a cross between William Carlos Williams and Dr. Mengele. "Drown Yourself" is cousin to David Bunch, while "Keeping House" updates Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Proof that Blumlein needn't deal with the fantastic to evoke tremors of dis-ease comes in "The Wet Suit," a tale of domestic kinkiness. And "Shed His Grace" is one of the few stories I've yet seen that can stand shoulder to shoulder with Aldiss's *Report on Probability A* (1968).

Michael, come back—we hardly knew ye!

I am continually astonished by how sometimes a new writer appears with an esthetic and talent and set of perceptions so fully formed and so congruent with the main line of SF as it already exists that he or she can be slotted right into the procession at the head of the parade, as if that very spot had been kept open precisely for that

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one half-foreseen person. Usually the new writer has been a quiet longtime reader of SF—especially magazine SF—and I seriously doubt whether any other training would suffice to produce such a scion. It is by such indoctrination and inspiration that our noble lineage perpetuates itself, and all the more reason our magazines must not die.

Mary Rosenblum is such a case. Her stories slip so neatly into the besieged core of SF, incorporating and extending a canonical style and set of tropes, that it sometimes seems she was summoned forth from the void by pure readerly need. *Asimov's* audience knows her well, and now can re-encounter nine of her stories from these pages in her first collection, *Synthesis & Other Virtual Realities* (Arkham House, hardcover, $21.95, 280 pages). These stories (many of them set in Rosenblum's Drylands future) are remarkable for their clear vision and broad embrace of a plethora of characters and assorted hard-edged locales. In Rosenblum's writing, we can trace favorite veins from the past—Zenna Henderson's *People* stories; Heinlein's YA books; Campbell's "Who Goes There?"; and '80s cyberpunk, just to name a few—yet the result is thoroughly individual and state-of-the-art.

"The Centaur Garden" is perhaps the best example of this. With its Delanyesque flute-playing protagonist, a Varley-style female centaur, a Zelazny-dark brooding schemer, and a bio-enclave out of Richard Grant, it encapsulates and extends in just a few pages whole decades of SF development.

Mary Rosenblum ably carries the weight of our field on her shoulders, and seems quite happy to do so.

Somebody seems to have stolen a large chunk of time from me. I swear it was just yesterday that I was reading Michael Bishop's first story, "Pinon Fall," in a 1970 issue of *Galaxy* at age sixteen. Now both Bishop and I are nearly thirty years older, and the man has amassed a stature and bibliography second to no one in our field. Not a bad accomplishment for a few days' labor.

Bishop's newest is *At the City Limits of Fate* (Edgewood Press, trade, $14.00, 328 pages), and what a treasure-trove it is! One story herein appeared as early as 1982 (the title piece), but most are of more recent vintage, including "Allegra's Hand" from last year in this very magazine. They show Bishop in a gamut of moods and styles, but all exhibit his usual high humanity and unstinting artistry.

The book sports an epigram from Wells concerning the search for God, and many of the stories reflect this multiplex quest, as does the subtle arrangement of items: the first piece is "Beginnings," a reimagining of the Crucifixion; smack dab in the middle is "For Thus Do I Remember Carthage," a tale of Saint Augustine and quantum physics; and concluding the

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volume is "I, Iscariot," the online trial of an a-life recreation of Judas. Scattered amongst these are everything from the blasphemous Frederic Brown zinger "God's Hour," to the Flannery O'Connor pastiche "Among the Handlers." Masterful non-theistic SF is represented by such gems as "Reading the Silks" and "The Ommatidium Miniatures."

This collection reflects an evolutionary change from Bishop's earliest writing, as how could it not? Gone is the youth who gave us sometimes garish morality plays on space-operatic worlds. In his place stands a seasoned veteran from the Wars of Compassion and Pity, one whose eye is attuned mostly to the battleground of this Earth, where, as in the apocalyptic "Snapshots From the Butterfly Plague," salvation might very well consist of nothing more than hoping to see the face of a lost love sketched in the sky.

Rhyme Time

No poet I, so expect no learned exegesis here of meter and stanza. In *terza rima* I do not traffic. Yet I can still relish poetry—especially poems employing SF, fantasy, and horror themes—and point to some recent publications that will satisfy any of your hungers in that direction.

Neat Sheets (Tachyon Publications, chapbook, $6.50, 26 pages) represents newly discovered work done by the late James Tiptree in the '40s and '50s. Karen Joy Fowler, in her introduction, finds little of the mature Tiptree here, yet to my eye, phrases such as "I am burned to a fine white bone of truth" and "'Life' is just another name for agony" speak to me of pure Sheldonian anguish. Read and weep.

From Dark Regions Press come four chapbooks in an ongoing series, all handsomely produced, with introductions and illustrations and even author photos. What a labor of love! Herb Kauderer's *Variations of Sleeping Alone* ($4.95, 42 pages) explores dreams of aliens and programmers, space-travel and hauntings, in an alluringly calm and simple manner. *Moon Canoes* ($3.95, 38 pages), by Wendy Rathbone, utilizes the first-person voice in many instances to get under the skin of astronauts, vampires, and robots with grace and guile. Jacie Ragan flits over a moonlit October Country landscape as a totemic bird in *The Crow's Companion* ($3.95, 32 pages). And W. Gregory Stewart displays the most formally and tonally varied selection in his *Antepenult* ($3.95, 36 pages).

And from Permeable Press comes David Memmott's *The Larger Earth* (trade, $9.95, 104 pages), a set of linked poems subtitled "Descending Notes of a Grounded Astronaut." With their Daliesque titles and Ballardian/Malzbergian tropes, these poems evoke all the failed NASA dreams of our fallen age, creating an atmosphere of weary desuetude.

Shoestring Pleasures

The allure of Ace Doubles never

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dies. Now Permeable Press is issuing "Pocket Rockets," two novellas back-to-back, in trade format for $8.00. The one I sampled featured Carolina Vegas Starr's *Toxic Shock Syndrome* (63 pages) and Mark Romyn's *Flyscraper* (41 pages). These two pieces happen to work particularly well together, sharing a certain gonzo sensibility. If John Waters filmed a documentary of Kathy Acker forced to adapt her schtick to a drunken Vegas crowd, the result might be *Toxic Shock Syndrome,* which details the exploits of some decidedly non-PC feminists confronting a government plot to kill women power figures. *Flyscraper* is cinematic in its own way, but more in the scatalogical Mel Brooks vein. Mad Scientist Dr. Pedro Valdez breeds vicious intelligent superflies (bad pun intentional) which are only defeated by bullheaded General Adams, the lovely Dr. Richards, and the excitable Dr. Kong. Good unclean fun.

From Ernest Bramah to Barry Hughart, many western fantasy writers have been seduced by a gaudy Orient of the mind that never really existed, perfect locale for glamorous adventures and subtle intrigue. The latest talented perpetrators of this meme appear in *Floating Worlds: Oriental Fantasies* (Obelesk Books, chapbook, $6.00, 46 pages), edited by Gary Bowen. Mark Noe imagines an episode from the life of Lady Murasaki in "Demon of the Copper Gate." James Dorr tells of a wizard snarled in kite string in "A Magician from the Wuyi Shan Mountains." Charlee Jacob tracks a bloodthirsty Crusader through the Mideast in "Renaud." Love in modern Japan is facilitated by a magic kettle in Lela Buis's "Dragon Rain." Sapient fish aid a persecuted Chinese woman in "The Perfect Antidote" by Beverly Heinze. And Mary Ann Mohanraj finds a goddess still alive in modern India in "Goddess Blessing." Why not experience "a cycle of Cathay" yourself with these fine writers?

Serious frivolity is in short supply today. (Of endless silly drivel and "satire," there is always more than a sufficiency.) Brautigan and DeVries are dead, Vonnegut seems to have ceased writing, and Tom Robbins grows grey. That is why we must all welcome first-novelist Peter Gelman, who shows us in his *Flying Saucers Over Hennepin* (Permeable Press, trade, $12.00, 192 pages) just how the game is played.

Set in Minneapolis in the late '80s, *Saucers* is schizophrenically narrated by one Chopper Bloch, fumbling publisher of a conspiracy-minded fanzine with the same title as this novel. Bloch believes that malevolent polyurethane-based aliens from the Fornax Cluster are busily taking over us Earthlings via insidious rays. This would explain, for instance, why the mannequins of bigtime furrier Columbus Binder begin leering at him; why Bloch's girlfriend, Hester Binder, suddenly forsakes her punk ethos, turns plastic, and moves back home; and exactly what ingredients go into the

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bubbling vats at the Spread-O processed-meat plant.

Directing his Pynchonesque cast of misfits and oddballs with verve, limning a portrait of a Minneapolis more like Cockaigne than the Midwest, Gelman writes with blithe unconcern for fictional protocol or "neatness," salting his text with wry questions and observations. Reporting back from his rounds of "spying on the city in his guise as an idiot and low-life," Bloch—or Gelman—spins a hilarious tale that addresses crucial dilemmas of our modern existence via a rubber chicken upside the head.

PUBLISHER ADDRESSES: Ministry of Whimsy Press, PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315. Necronomicon Press, PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893. Dark Regions Press, PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524. White Pine Press, 10 Village Square, Fredonia, NY 14063. Tachyon Publications, 1459 18th St. #139, SF, CA 94107. Permeable Press, 47 Noe St. #4, SF, CA 94114. Obelesk Books, PO Box 1118, Elkton, MD 21922. Edgewood Press, PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238.

Terminii

Together you and I have patiently followed two recent series through a duet of volumes apiece. Now comes the culminative third members of the sets, theoretically providing Pythagorean wholeness to their fictional universes. Do the creations cohere or disintegrate? Let's check.

Dead Things (St. Martin's, hardcover, $20.95, 201 pages) is the capstone atop Richard Calder's previous *Dead Girls* (1994) and *Dead Boys* (1995). We can now see a very intelligible path and destination laid out, not apparent from the start.

The first book was certainly the most straightforward and "normal," capable of being read almost exclusively—albeit too simply—as gorgeously bejeweled cyberpunk, an objective correlative to our contemporary sexual hangups. With the second, Calder's mimetic universe shattered. Quantum-level tamperings inherent in the CPU wombs of the Cartier androids fractionated time and space, producing a certain line of history in which our lovable lad Ignatz Zwakh became Dagon the Elohim, slaughterer of the doll-girls he once adored, and slave to a plague known as Meta, defined thusly in *Dead Things*: "Meta is a psychosomatic disorder which affects, not just those who possess the disorder, but everything they perceive. It affects the fabric of space and time itself. Meta is all."

As *Dead Things* opens, Meta still holds full sway, and has for the thousand years of Dagon's bloody life. He remembers nothing of his existence as Ignatz, except perhaps the vaguest subliminal stirrings. But all that is about to change. Captured by the last survivors of the old paradigm and forcibly re-educated about the origins of his Meta-dominated multiverse, Ignatz must swallow The Reality Bomb, then detonate him-

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self at the Omphalos of the continua in order to restore non-Meta health to existence. But the exact nature of the baseline reality is one final surprise left in Calder's bag of tricks, a revelation that adds both more humanity and less cosmic importance to the trilogy.

Of course, all this convoluted plot—which might just as well be derived from any Van Vogt novel—is hardly the main reason to read Calder. As with the first two entries, what we are lusting after is the brilliantly corrupt baroque inflections of his text, the leering gloss he provides on everything from superheroes to Grail Quests; Krazy Kat to Gnosticism; Wonderbras to the French Revolution; Xena, Warrior Princess, to Poe. Reading *Dead Things* is like having an imp-sized George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde sitting on your shoulder and regaling you with cynical witticisms as you watch all five hundred cable channels simultaneously.

There is a feeling in this book that Calder has indeed exhausted these particular obsessions of his in this particular manner. Where he will venture from here is anybody's guess. But then, his talent will probably open just about any rococo door he chooses.

Over the exact same span as the Calder trilogy we have also been stepping-stoning across another series from a writer who might be profitably considered as Calder's literary godfather, Michael Moorcock. With the publication of *The War Amongst the Angels* (Millennium, hardcover, £16.99, 247 pages) the series known as "The Second Ether" (which began with *Blood* [1994] and continued with *Fabulous Harbours* [1995]) has come to an inconclusive conclusion perfectly consistent with the author's open-ended philosophy of existence, where everything is "permanently conscious, permanently changing, permanently dying."

Unlike Calder's books, Moorcock's most recent trio have from the start been more diffuse and meandering. If reading Calder was like being strapped to the nosecone of a missile in flight as it barreled through a speed-warped alien landscape, then reading Moorcock was like experiencing the explosion of the warhead itself. Fragments shot off in all directions, smoke and noise abounded, and your sense of wholeness was shattered. And yet in the eye of the explosion was a curious peace.

Blood introduced us to an alternate timeline where the US was politically sundered, flaws of "colour" provided a mystic energy source, and the *jugadors* Jack Karaquazian, Sam Oakenhurst, and Colinda Dovero played the Game of Time on the side of Chaos against Law, across all the "scales" of the multiverse. *Fabulous Harbours* established in a series of short stories the connections between the world of *Blood* and the vast and talented von Bek/von Begg clan, an assortment of gaudy nonpareils who inhabited yet another plane of existence that was

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not ours. Now, in the final book, these two axes of story intersect more fully, and at the coordinates zero, zero, the Multiverse is remade.

War opens as a rather old-fashioned memoir penned by one Rose von Bek (who we learn was born Margaret Rose Moorcock, niece to an author named Michael!). As in "Lunching with the Antichrist," one of the stories in *Harbours*, an aching nostalgia permeates Rose's tale of her life. Her twentieth-century world—where continent-spanning tramway lines and zeppelins abound, and where WWII transpired rather differently—is on the verge of coarsening, and quite a few of the deservedly elitist von Beks find it all rather discouraging. Of course, many of the family may seek refuge and adventure by walking the moonbeam roads into the Second Ether, that realm of warring angels where mortals blossom into their frightening avatars.

Interleaved with Rose's narration are chapters told from the POV of Jack Karaquazian (read Jerry Cornelius), who has found his lost lover Colinda Dovero, but now stands poised to lose her if he is to rescue the Multiverse from the clutches of Law and the Original Insect.

Like a movie by Luis Buñuel, *War* is exceedingly slippery and shifty. Characters come and go, mutating their forms and personalities, across an unstable landscape. Yet within these parameters, Moorcock manages to tell some old-fashioned tales of heroism and adventure (albeit with a parodic edge) and describe scenes of urban and rural beauty as if he were Fielding writing *Tom Jones* (1749). Like Philip José Farmer, Moorcock agglomerates various historical and fictional mythic figures—Wild Bill Cody, Tom Mix, Sexton Blake, Dick Turpin—into his yeasty mix of characters, blurring the borderline between those composed of "mere" words and those fashioned of flesh and blood.

If the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* (1968) had been scripted by Fellini (the Italian director lends his name to a holy chalice in this novel), the result might have been *The War Amongst the Angels*.

Engineering the Big Crunch

How mentally lazy we critics and readers can be! If asked, for instance, to name some top-notch writers of Hard SF, we invariably trot out the usual suspects. Bear, Brin, Benford, Baxter, Forward, Clement, Niven, Sheffield, McAuley, Egan—ho-hum, maybe we should just assign a handy acronym to the list, like the prisoners who gave numbers to their memorized, oft-told jokes.

A little effort, of course, turns up a plethora of other worthy writers of this kind of fiction—some just beginning, others around for years. There's Jeffrey Carver, Doug Beason, the team of William Barton and Michael Capobianco, Paul Preuss, John Stith, John Barnes, Roger Macbride Allen, Catherine Asaro, and Linda Nagata. There,

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that wasn't so hard, was it? And see how we've broadened our range of potential pleasures!

One of these writers who might be thought of as "hidden" (although he's recently won a Nebula) is Robert Sawyer. Last year, *Analog* ran a serial by him that's now in book form: *Starplex* (Ace, mass-market, $5.99, 289 pages). While not perhaps as utterly mind-boggling or stylistically outrageous as some of the A-list classics, it is nonetheless scrupulously rigorous, exciting, surprising, and emotionally involving. In short, all you could ask for in any SF novel, hard or soft.

The *Starplex* is a very unconventional roving interstellar vehicle, more like a small city than a craft, which has been assigned to investigate a network of mysterious stargates recently discovered by humanity. Over the several decades since they attained access to these gates, humanity and their dolphin partners have undergone a seachange of sorts (although as we shall learn, many ancestral human personality traits remain, lagging as always behind material progress).

Two other sentient races have been encountered: the aggressive, boar-like Waldahudin and the passive composite beings called the Ib. Together with mankind, they have formed a political-economic union to exploit the stargates, opening up larger portions of the network. It's an uneasy alliance, and the *Starplex*—with its quadraracial crew—experiences all the possible tensions and benefits of the mix of sapients.

In the solar system that is their latest assignment, all hell begins to break loose. More or less simultaneously, the director of the vessel, Keith Lansing, must contend with treachery, the discovery of spacegoing dark-matter lifeforms, a suicidal Ib, an invasion from the future, and a martial skirmish with Waldahudin militants—as well as lustful thoughts of infidelity and the revelation that his personal life seems fated to stretch ahead ten billion years!

Despite opening with a scene that shows *Starplex* having already survived all this hurlyburly, Sawyer manages to maintain great suspense throughout all these crises. He stages battles and scientific revelations with equal ease and panache. Just when you think you've grasped certain essentials, he swiftly pulls the carpet out from under your conceptual feet. This is no mean trick.

Sawyer also deserves credit for trying and managing to escape a certain multimedia shadow that accompanies all tales now set on the bridge of a starship boldly going where no one etc. By rethinking such simple yet vital matters as chains-of-command, division of duties, types of data-displays, means of propulsion, and so on, Sawyer creates a vision that is distinct enough to stand on its own, yet—let's be honest—still wistfully borrows some of the cachet of that famous TV show.

Like a latter-day Edmond Ham-

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ilton, Sawyer earns the right to throw suns around with aplomb, and makes us relish the spectacle.

Honey, I Shrunk the Thrills

Another hard SF writer sometimes lost in the shuffle is James Hogan. I read and enjoyed Hogan's first novel, *Inherit the Stars,* when it originally appeared twenty years ago, as well as the sequels that formed his "Giants" series. Then I lost track of him, my extenuating plea being only lack of time, not interest. So I picked up his latest, *Bug Park* (Baen Books, hardcover, $22.00, 416 pages), with much curiosity. Would the writer I remembered as a purveyor of modern yet somewhat old-fashioned gosh-wow adventures still be performing up to snuff? Well, the good news is that Hogan has gotten even better (despite an occasional still awkward bit of phrasing here and there). This book provides the excitement of a game of *Doom,* the skewed perspectives of *Toy Story* (1995) and the cat-and-mousing of *Mission Impossible* (1996), all bundled up in a story of real speculative power that is not only suitable for that sense-of-wonder-equipped adult, but perfect also for any bright teen.

The firm called Neurodyne is moving down the Drexler path toward the creation of real nanodevices. But they are doing it in a unique way. Starting with mere macro- and microdevices controlled by human operators, they build the next level below from the current plateau. And because the operators ride their devices with nearly full sensory immersion, they in effect *become* these complex mini-creatures, experiencing the world from an insectivial perspective. Now, toss in industrial plotting, two teen geniuses, Kevin Heber and his pal Taki, and various challenges to be overcome by on-the-fly engineering, and you have a book that John Campbell would have been proud to serialize.

Hogan is great at describing life from a bug's POV, making our familiar world of carpets and grass seem utterly alien. He moves some very credible characters through their paces, generating honest affection and concern for their fates in the reader. He even tosses in a few Jubal Harshaw-style observations on business and society, and imparts a few lessons about the dangers of kowtowing to authority, whether scientific or legal.

In a recent online discussion group I belong to, talk turned to the books that had most influenced people. Participants began to name all the Big Names of the Western Canon in the approved manner, until one brave soul chirped up and nominated—The Hardy Boys! Then dozens joined in with their votes for the crime-solving brothers as central to the formation of their reading tastes and literary values.

Well, *Bug Park* is a superior Hardy Boys adventure for the nineties.

Tickle Me Alice

Is there anyone reading this who has not yet encountered the darkly

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frolicsome work of Jeff Noon? His debut novel, *Vurt* (1993), garnered him much critical attention, as well as picking up the Clarke Award. The next, *Pollen* (1995), helped him earn a Campbell Award. And now comes *Automated Alice* (Crown, hardcover, $21.00, 223 pages), a book seemingly outside the *Vurt-Pollen* subcreation, yet one that proves to be a kind of witty metafictional gloss on the earlier books, as well as one of the worthiest Dodgsonian homages yet penned.

Let's refresh our memories of Noon's world.

Vurt is set in a futuristic UK Manchester gone surreal. The population is losing its collective mind to various recreational stimulants, not the least of which is the Vurt. Supposedly, Vurt is merely a kind of shared virtual reality. Unfortunately, Vurt turns out to be much more dangerous and tangible than this. Vurt is another plane of existence, created by human will and effort, but now independently alive. Creatures emerge into our world from the Vurt, and humans can be trapped there in body as well as mind. On top of all this, the human genome has begun to prove rather too promiscuous for its own good, mixing with other species and even androids. Various animal-human hybrids such as dog-people exist, as well as robot-human fusions. Finally, human mental powers known as Shadow are exploitable by some.

Noon's skill and genius became evident not so much in the creation of this basic scenario, but in its wild delivery and its colorful details. Stuffed to the gills with catchy inspired slang, the first-person narrative dramatically seduces the reader into Noon's strange world, as we follow a lad named Scribble on his bizarre quest for his missing sister-lover. Noon's inspired notion of making access to the Vurt dependent on literal insertion of artificial drug-feathers down one's throat was just one of the many catchy visual hooks he implanted. Imbued with the ecstasy-fueled rave vitality of "Madchester," the book read like a totally happening update of Philip K. Dick, Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and Kotzwinkle's *The Fan Man* (1974). Or, to pursue a more musical analogy, like a synthesized and sample-stuffed remix of the Kinks' *Village Green Preservation Society* (1968).

Pollen was set some years after in the same manic Manchester—now suffering from a plague with origins in the Vurt—but the novel suffered from a few flaws. Narration was split among several participants, diverting the story's flow into various cul-de-sacs. The main protagonist, Sibyl Jones, was a mother and a cop, albeit a rogue one, removing some of the young-rebel thrills. And certain repetitions of motifs from *Vurt*—offstage wizards, missing relatives—seemed a bit recycled.

Noon must have sensed this trap of repeating himself, for *Automated Alice* strikes off in what at first seems a completely new direction. Yet it finishes by proving itself a

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true cousin to the first two volumes.

Noon's third novel is, on its surface level, nothing more nor less than a direct stylistic and conceptual sequel to Lewis Carroll's Alice books—like, say, Gilbert Adair's *Alice Through the Needle's Eye* (1984). Told in pitch-perfect pseudo-Victorian kids'-book prose, intellectually and emotionally playful, *Automated Alice* delivers plenty of the same frissons that millions of readers have enjoyed in the original tales. It's full of quirky characters, logical illogic, silly yet deep wordplay, coded allusions to modern personages and events, and a kind of Douglas Hofstadter scientific whimsicality. In retrospect, it's no surprise that Noon would turn his hand to an Alice book, since both *Vurt* and *Pollen* are filled with references to Carroll's work.

In *Automated*, 1860-era Alice climbs through the mechanism of a grandfather clock and emerges in 1998 Manchester. There she finds a world of animal-human hybrids, strange termite-based cybernetic technology, and quantum physics based on "carryon" particles. Authoritarian "Civil Serpents" rule, and access to virtual reality is attained by tickling one's *nose* with artificial feathers. Accused of murder in this madhouse, Alice must clear herself while collecting missing items needed in her own world, seeking always to return to her past.

The commentary on *Vurt* and *Pollen* is everywhere—brought out overtly by the brief appearance of a writer named "Zenith O'Clock," author of *Shurt* and *Solumn*—but it is hardly necessary to have read these to enjoy *Automated Alice*. Noon has taken the trouble to pack every page of his surprisingly linear story with more than enough puzzles and gags to keep the wise child in all of us amused. And with the aid of superb illustrations by Harry Trumbore—a perfect blend of Tenniel, *Mad* magazine, Jules Feiffer, and Maurice Sendak—this book proves worthy to sit Humpty Dumpty-like alongside Carroll's classics. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

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NEXT ISSUE

Next issue is our immense October/November Special Double Issue, a huge issue jammed with as much material as we can possibly get into it, including two big novellas, several novelettes, critical articles, poems, cartoons, features, and as much other stuff as we can possibly pack in without splitting it at the seams. You'll be getting considerably more fiction for a lower cover price than the average paperback novel, and you'll find inside a much greater variety—by today's top authors as well as the fields hottest newcomers—than any one book could possibly offer. In fact, these Double Issues may be one of the best reading bargains in the genre—so don't miss this one!

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Popular author **Allen Steele**, who won a Hugo Award last year for his story "The Death of Captain Future," returns with an exciting new novella, our fast-and-furious cover story, hurtling us through the ages with a group of time-travelers on a desperate secret mission who find themselves stuck in the middle of a Paradox and a sticky—and potentially disastrous—situation, the result of rushing in "... Where Angels Fear to Tread."

OTHER TOP-OF-THE-LINE WRITERS

Popular author **R. Garcia y Robertson**, one of the best action writers in the business, returns with a sizzlingly fast-paced and hugely entertaining story that mixes Renaissance swordplay and Court intrigue with high-tech far-future adventure, a story that comes complete with superpowerful cyborgs, courtiers in lace collars, computer hackers, back-alley assassins, missile strikes, glittering masked balls, and monstrous flying centipedes, all on view in a gorgeously colored visit to "Fair Verona"; critically acclaimed British writer **Ian R. MacLeod** takes us back to the days of Ancient Rome, to a distant outpost of the Empire where some very strange things are going on, in a vivid, compelling, and scary new novella that brings us into contact with the dread figure of "The Golden Keeper"; **Michael F. Flynn**, long one of the mainstays of our sister magazine Analog, makes a chilling Asimov's debut with a demonstration of the fact that sometimes it's better not to look at what lurks in the shadows, especially if you live in the "House of Dreams"; new writer **Kage Baker** whisks us back through time to a Russian colony in nineteenth-century California to unravel some of the enigmas—and the lethal surprises—behind the "Facts Relating to the Arrest of Dr. Kalugin"; noted author and critic **Gregory Feeley** returns to these pages after a long absence to take us for a deadly game of cat-and-mouse in the cold reaches of the Outer Solar System, as strange antagonists match wits "On the Ice Islands"; **Rebecca Ore** shows us how workplace rivalries can have catastrophic effects for the entire world, in "Collected Ogoense"; the inventive **Robert Reed** returns with proof that even the most intricate and technologically sophisticated of plans can sometimes go astray, with a sly and tricky look inside the "Mind's Eye"; and new writer **James Sarafin** takes us along with a hunter who is about to come face-to-face with a lot more Sport than he expects—or than he can handle—in a suspenseful encounter with "Shadows on the Mountain."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column continues its examination of "Ships That Sail to Mars"; and **Norman Spinrad** scrutinizes "Postmodern Fantasy"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our immense October/November Double Issue on sale on your newsstand on September 9, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic issues we have coming up for you!

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Last call for WorldCon and a couple of Tolkien meets. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 1997

8-10—**RebelCon.** For info, write: **10 Rankin St., Worcester MA 01605. (E-mail) rebelcon@aol.com.** Or phone: **(508) 587-1223** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Taunton (near Boston) MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Guests will include: Babylon 5's J. Michael Straczynski, DC's Arne Starr.

8-18—**TachyCon. (407) 628-1454. (E-mail) tachycon@ao.net. (Web) www.ao.net/~tachycon/Next.html.** Orlando FL.

8-10—**Northern Tolkien Festival.** Helga Eng Hall, University of Oslo, Norway.

8-10—**GenCon. (414) 248-3625.** MECCA, Milwaukee WI. Big gaming meet. Many SF games. Events start the 6th.

8-11—**MythCon.** Pepperdine U., Malibu CA. Theme: "J.R.R. Tolkien: The Achievement of His Literary Life."

14-17—**Dracula Centennial.** Doubletree Hotel, Los Angeles CA. F. Saberhagen, G. Wilson, E. Miller, Yarbro.

15-17—**NecronomiCon. (Web) necropress.com/necromicon.** Marriott, Providence RI. Lovecraft/Cthulhu Mythos.

15-17—**PortmeriCon. (E-mail) sixofone@netreach.net.** Portmeirion, Wales UK. Where "Prisoner" TV show filmed.

15-17—**QuarterCon. (E-mail) bjornts@ii.uib.no.** Academic Quarter, Bergen, Norway. K. Kerr, Ingar Knudtsen.

16—**Comic Art Con. (801) 463-1555. (E-mail) cinema@axxis.com.** Salt Lake City UT. Julie Bell, B. Vallejo. Comics.

16-17—***FantastiCon. (954) 434-6060.*** *Airport Hilton, Los Angeles CA. W. Campbell. Commercial Star Trek event.*

22-24—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-9030.** Howard Johnson East. J. Barnes, G. Garb.

22-24—**UK National Star Trek Con, 43 Eastern Ave., Polegate, E. Sussex BN26 6HG, UK.** Radisson, Heathrow.

28-Sep. 1—**EuroGenCon, 120 Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge CB1 3LB, UK. (01223) 212517.** Gaming meet.

28-Sep. 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** Riverwalk, San Antonio TX. WorldCon. About $150.

29-Sep. 1—**SF Expo, 105 Pepper Dr., Collegeville PA 19426. (610) 454-1197.** Adam's Mark, Phila. PA. Media SF.

29-Sep. 1—**StarQuest, Box 20066, Castro Valley CA 94546. (Web) www.StarQuest.org.** Red Lion, San Jose. Trek.

SEPTEMBER 1997

5-7—**CopperCon, Box 82303, Phoenix AZ 85071. (602) 973-2054. (E-mail) leew@indirrect.com.** Relax after WorldCon.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucCONeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701.** Cherryh, Rothman, Schmidt. The WorldCon. About $125.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. G. Turner, Benford. The WorldCon.

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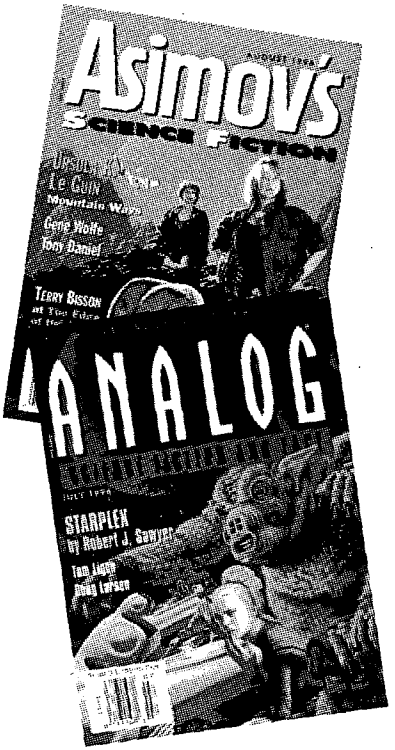

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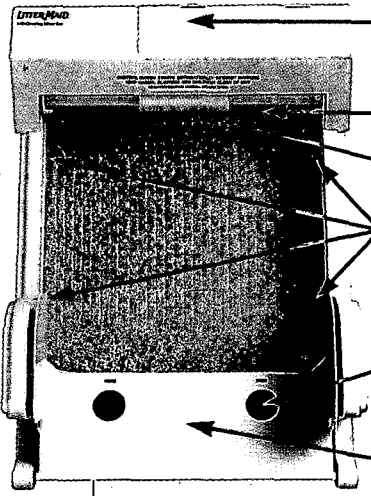

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